THE RAGE OF CTHULHU

GARY FRY

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THE RAGE OF CTHULHU

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The Rage of Cthulhu by Gary Fry

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THE RAGE OF CTHULHU

Gary Fry

In memory of Dr. Trevor Butt

1947-2015

“Cthulhu still lives, too, I suppose, again in that chasm of stone which has shielded him since the sun was young.
Who knows the end?
What had risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise. Loathsomeness waits and dreams in the deep, and decay spreads over the tottering cities of men.
A time will come “

– H. P. Lovecraft: ‘The Call of Cthulhu’

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, Christine, I think I can see a way in.”

George and his wife had walked from Whitby on the Cleveland Way, a public footpath leading along England’s northeast coastline. After passing the town’s famous abbey and a holiday park located on the lip of a splendid bay, they’d spotted two buildings: a towering lighthouse and, about a hundred yards farther on, a property whose roof bore a giant foghorn at least five yards long.

As the lighthouse appeared to be private, and manned by staff, they’d moved on to the second building, which looked anything but operational. It was one-storey high and bore off-colour walls. Weeds grew in wild profusion around its sealed doorway and all the windows were boarded up…except for one. This was what George had just identified.

“Be careful,” Christine said, the way she’d done lately, as if he was some sort of cripple. “If you fall, we won’t get help out here quickly.”

If she meant an ambulance, why didn’t she say so? George experienced a flare of temper but decided not to be difficult. This, the first leg of their holiday around the world, was supposed to be pleasant. They’d visited the area as youngsters – just after marrying, forty years ago, before they’d had any money – and had always vowed to return. George wished it was in better circumstances but that was how life went; no use being maudlin about it.

After all, there was still fun to be had. Huddling low against the chill – it was a blustery February weekday, dampness heavy in the air, as if rain or worse was due – he moved closer to that one unboarded window, eliciting another comment from his wife.

“Don’t go in there, George,” she said, anxiety from recent events etched into her voice. “It’s private property. The men from the lighthouse

might come over."

And do what? George wanted to know, as if needing to take on the world and all its infuriating rules. In his current situation, what were the consequences of misbehaving?

"I want to look inside, Christine," he replied, puffing as he shuffled forwards, limbs aching with the effort. For a moment, he went dizzy, but closing his eyes and eliminating the world for several seconds helped to stabilise him. Finally he was ready to enter.

By the time his wife approached, holding the new iPhone with which she'd filmed the remarkable landscape these last few days, he'd swung a leg over the sill and levered himself inside the building. Refusing to offer Christine another opportunity to cause a fuss, he cut through the room ahead. This resembled some sort of sleeping quarters, possibly once occupied by whoever had maintained the foghorn when the place had been in service.

The board-free window failed to let in much afternoon daylight. All the same, George soon chanced upon a door with a big brass handle at hip-height. He turned it, releasing the door with a sticky sound of gunge separating around its frame, and then paced forwards.

A more insistent source of light lay up ahead. He figured out that he stood in a corridor leading to other rooms. The building had appeared to be just yards from the cliff's edge, a considerable drop to a rocky beach and the unforgiving sea. But as he moved on, the ground here felt solid, even though some of his dizziness had returned.

The light at the end of the passageway appeared to come from a room whose door was missing. The front of the property must have suffered structural damage, with stone broken in inaccessible places. This was probably why the authorities hadn't sealed off those parts.

He entered the room, marvelling at its contents. Was this where the foghorn had been operated and maintained? A bulky engine was attached to the wall, clearly having not been used for years. Alongside it stood a beguiling arrangement of valves, cocks and pressure dials, each rusted or draped with cobwebs.

George loved places like this. They reminded him of his childhood back in Leeds, of visiting railway stations with his parents, exploring great steam carriages. Perhaps this was why he'd broken into such an out-of-the-

way property. He'd heard that during traumatic periods people tended to revisit the past, an attempt to contextualise life from a distant perspective. Hadn't a famous philosopher once said similar, someone he'd studied as an undergraduate before his career in academia?

Maybe that was true, but it wasn't important now. This was George's new attitude. It wasn't that his medical diagnosis had led him to abandon insights into the human condition, rather that he had fresh experiences to enjoy, away from the ivory tower comfort of textbooks. With only limited time left, he wanted to throw himself into as much of life as possible.

He advanced into the next room, through a doorway at the rear of the foghorn's control centre. Wondering what sound the foghorn on top of the building had once made, he examined the new area, given over to water tanks and batteries, which had surely once compressed air to provide the noise. It was here that an exterior wall covered in a thick skin of plaster had collapsed, letting in light from outside.

George heard a wind thumping against the property's exterior, the sea smashing against the cliff-side below. What with the building's unusual acoustics – the walls were thick stone, the floors bereft of carpet or furniture – these sounds had impact on him, rendering him unsteady as he moved. His vision also felt challenged, especially when he reached a lengthy room at the front of the property, beyond which had once sailed the ships that the whole place had sought to safeguard.

It was now that he observed what he ought to have previously: none of the other rooms had windows. But that wasn't true of this one, whose longest side bore four square glassless peepholes. Each was three feet tall and wide, and none had been boarded up. That might be because it would be difficult for anyone to move safely along the coastal lip and seal them. Whatever the truth was, George could now see way across a choppy North Sea.

But this wasn't all that caught his interest.

In addition to how noises here – the restless howl of wind, an unfailing susurration of the sea – continued to unsettle him, he detected a curious scent, which was how he imagined magma expelled from an active volcano might smell, a pungently sulphurous aroma. More distortions in his visual field left his perspective strained, as if the room was a photograph that

someone was tugging out of shape in every direction. After several seconds, he began to feel nauseated and was forced to look away.

Was he suffering another attack, like the ones that had first alerted him to his illness? That might be the case, but as he stabilised his vision by focusing beyond the wavering room, his attention went no farther than the windows, which had surely been damaged by some seismic event.

Sections of wall around the openings had buckled inwards, great stones tilted towards the interior, the inch-deep plaster torn from the sinew beneath. It looked as if something had rammed into the building from the outside, but what could be so large and powerful, let alone possess the height such an assault required? The building had to be two-hundred feet from the seabed; such a manoeuvre was impossible even for the most monstrous creature.

More sensory distortions sweeping over him, George turned to look for a way out, returning to his wife and her well-meaning support. Just then he spotted more damage affecting the rear wall, which faced those mangled windows. In four spots, corresponding with each of the glassless openings, more plaster had been smashed away, revealing the property's flesh beneath.

Had something – no, at least four things – been thrust through the windows and struck this wall?

None of it made sense. George felt troubled and bewildered. He moved off, back along another stretch of corridor, seeking the room through which he'd entered, quite against Christine's sensible advice. She was simply concerned, as the spouse of anyone diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour would be. For this reason, he'd try not to reveal what was happening in his head right now. Indeed, by the time he exited, he hoped it would have all settled down.

CHAPTER TWO

George and Christine Cox were holidaying in Robin Hood's Bay, a tiny village seven miles south of the more famous Whitby. While both locations possessed an age-old charm, the smaller remained uncorrupted by tourist-driven attractions. Its steep high street was flanked by rows of quaint shops selling homemade foodstuff and aesthetic curios. There were pubs aplenty, and it was in the lounge bar of one that, after dining (fillet steak for George, locally caught lobster for Christine), they sat drinking a bottle of red.

Christine was reading the *Guardian.* While addressing dismaying headlines – further wars in the Middle East, friction among newly elected leaders of several North African countries – she shook her head, as if it was only a matter of time before the whole world was compromised.

It may be projection, thought George, drawing upon a concept from his former work as a social psychologist. *She's worrying about the state of the world to avoid feeling frightened by her private affairs.* But he could understand that, and once he'd poured her another glass of wine, he leaned toward her. "I'm sorry about what I did today. It was irresponsible. I should have known better."

Christine folded up the paper and looked at him, sympathy making her eyes glisten. "I don't want to be an old bore, George," she said, but what she meant was all too apparent: *Neither of us knows how long we have left together, so we should enjoy ourselves while we can…but within reason.*

She'd probably kept her response brief because the pub was quiet, just a few older people sitting in corners, nursing pints and wearing reflective expressions. Maybe they all realised how short time was, too.

After sipping more from his glass, George beat a fist against his chest. "There's nothing wrong with me physically. I feel as fit as I ever have."

"Yes, but Dr. Kilroy said…"

“Dr. Kill *Joy*, more like.”

“…Dr. Kilroy said you should never be left alone unless it was absolutely necessary. You might…” Now she lowered her voice even more. “Well, you might experience another *episode*, mightn’t you?”

George recalled the first one, back in his university office, which had forced him to take early retirement. The world had appeared to turn sideways but then he’d realised *he* had, falling to the ground as distorted perceptions had invaded his skull. His vision had swum in and out of focus, sound had boomed with subaquatic resonance, touch and taste had tingled with peppery sensations, and there’d been an earthy scent in the air. It had been truly disturbing, and George, never one to burden the health system unduly, had gone to hospital at once.

The tumour, diagnosed days later, lay perilously close to his brain’s core, the reptilian limbic system involved in a wide range of functions, including control of mood and bodily temperature. It was growing to one side, headed for his right occipital lobe, but as it had just been discovered, it was impossible to determine how aggressive it might prove to be. This was why the specialist in charge of his case – Dr. Kilroy, alarmingly young for someone with such responsibilities – had asked George and Christine to monitor behaviours, recording evidence of unusual developments. He’d also suggested that if they were still set on their world tour – which they’d delayed till their career duties were fulfilled and the children were adults – they’d be sensible to take it sooner rather than later.

George leaned back and smiled. “Do you know what the biggest impact upon me is, Christine?”

The wine settling her, his wife smiled back. The pub’s low light eliminated strain that had appeared recently on her face, making her look no older than when they’d met as undergraduates and enjoyed glorious summers of love. “What’s that, George?”

He hesitated before speaking but knew he must be truthful. Why lie when his days were so numbered?

“I feel as if nothing I do has any consequences anymore. Do you understand what I mean? In the past, when I thought I had years ahead of me, all my acts had implications. You know, I shouldn’t upset this or that person, because I’ll see them again over Christmas. Or I shouldn’t drive over the speed limit, because with too many endorsements on my licence,

the authorities will ban me. But I now feel as if I can do *anything* – well, within reason, of course. I don't mean I'm going to go out and commit murder or similar."

He hoped his last comment was comedic but Christine looked anything but amused. She simply gazed at him. "You're forgetting one thing, George."

"What's that, my love?"

She leaned forwards and her voice wasn't low anymore. "I *do* have years left. And so do our children. None of us wants you to do anything that might be hard to come to terms with once you're…well, once you're gone."

The glisten of moisture in her eyes had thickened to become tears, which soon rolled down her cheeks in silver trails.

"Hey, hey," he said, reaching forwards to squeeze her right arm. "What am *I* likely to do to make any of you feel that way?"

Christine wiped her face with the back of one sleeve. If other people in the pub were listening – George had the impression that a bald man to one side was staring across – then to hell with them. This was all that was important right now: him and his wife and their tragically truncated future.

"Christine? Are you okay?"

She looked up, eyelashes starred with moisture. To George's strained mind, these briefly resembled aquatic creatures, hideous squid or something more otherworldly. But when she spoke again, he listened carefully.

"I'm sorry, George. I'm being unreasonable, I know that. I realise that you're not capable of…well, of anything untoward."

"…*But*, Christine?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I detected a hesitation in your comment. That usually means there's a *but* lurking somewhere. How about sharing it with me?"

She looked at him. Then, her volume low again, she snapped, "There's no need to be clever, George. You're not lecturing students now."

Christine, who'd once thrived in the legal profession, was nobody's fool. All the same, George experienced a need to press her on this matter. "I guess I just want to know why you think I'm currently such a loose cannon."

His wife looked sheepish for a moment, but no longer than that. George perceived a difference in her expression, as if issues concerning his condition had just moved to another level of concern – from *wary* to *critical*. Finally she spoke.

“I haven’t mentioned it before. I suppose I didn’t want to complicate already difficult matters.”

George felt his heart rate speed up, pushing blood into his skull. His hands clenched into claws. He just wished she’d tell him what he needed to know.

Then she did.

“I’m not sure you’re even aware of this, but when you suffer your episodes – when you say that the world spins around and things don’t seem right – you can get *quite aggressive*, George. I mean, *scarily* so at times. It’s unlike you.”

He’d suffered several attacks lately, while restricted to home in his wife’s company. He’d always been passionate about many matters – especially social issues, as befitted his former academic discipline – but didn’t think he’d ever become *aggressive*. What did Christine mean by this?

So he asked her…and didn’t care for the evidence she presented. She plucked out her iPhone, the one with the in-built camera, and when she activated a recording made at their Leeds home, George felt his world crumble anew. Glancing up after the minute-long clip had finished, he felt emotional. In their familiar lounge, the recording’s subject had raged and mouthed obscenities.

George looked away and snatched up the newspaper his wife had been reading earlier, addressing articles about the state of the world.

“Do you know what *really* surprises me, Christine?” he said, his voice shaken by what he’d witnessed but also firmed with steely resolve.

“Tell me,” she replied, putting the phone back into her handbag. She clearly believed that her point had been made

He indicated an article discussing some violent conflict in the Middle East which was entering a new phase but with similar consequences. “I’m just surprised,” he said, struggling not to wonder whether Dr. Kilroy’s recommendation that his wife document George’s developing condition violated privacy laws, “that some terminally ill dictator somewhere in the

world, with access to nuclear weapons and nothing left to live for, has never nuked the lot of us."

His wife, with all her legal training, would know about medical ethics. Still, why speculate about this? What was he ever likely to do – sue his wife? Have the doctor disciplined? George laughed savagely, his robust upbringing hard-wired in his brain, making it hard for him to look at Christine while adjusting to this new perspective on his changing identity. He knew from experience that in such circumstances it was better to focus on an alternative issue, on something relatively safe.

That was when he recalled the foghorn station with its battered frontage, as if something immense had clattered against it, thrusting lengthy objects through its windows and breaking plaster from the opposite walls. What had happened to that building? The damage it had sustained made little sense at all.

If there was a failsafe way to learn about local events, it was asking someone who lived in the area about them. George turned to the bald guy in the corner, whose flesh looked weathered and whose clothing hinted at a career in the fishing industry.

"Greetings, sir," said George, adopting the voice he'd used in lectures, a half-hectoring, half-amused yell that had disarmed even his smuggest students. "I wonder if you might be of assistance."

The man had difficulty in responding, grunting a few non-syllables before taking another slurp from his almost empty pint.

"Charmed, I'm sure," George added, and then cut to the heart of his enquiry. He mentioned the foghorn building and the impact it had once suffered. Did the man, George wondered, possess any knowledge about this episode and, if so, would he be good enough to impart it?

It might have been the eccentricity of George's enquiry that caused the guy to look away, shaking his head almost imperceptibly. Or it might not. All George could be certain about was that as soon as he'd mentioned the property, the local had shown brief alarm in his eyes. This might have been George's heightened perception at work, a residual impact of his weird experience a few hours earlier. But it might have been something else, too.

Whatever the truth was, after learning what he just had about himself from his well-meaning wife, George was in no mood to pursue the issue, and so he promptly got up to visit the lavatory. "*Suit yourself*," he

murmured while rising, and, as he paced away, he didn't even look back at Christine, let alone the man in the corner.

What was happening to him? He rested his forehead against the bathroom wall, while emptying himself into the urinal, urging the intruder deep inside his skull to yield all its terrors. *Come on, let's have you. Just show me how bad it's going to get*.

He'd come to think of the tumour in this way: as an invader, an insurgent, a *thing* lurking at his core. It compromised every shred of honour he'd ever upheld, let alone advocated among others. What Christine had revealed on her iPhone cut against everything he'd once believed about how people exercised moral restraint, making rational choices in circumstances not of their choosing. He was a passionate proponent of self-directed civility, a firm believer in agency and responsibility. But now all this was being stripped away from him. It was truly horrifying, the worst thing that could have happened to him. And yet he had to fight on. It was all anyone could do.

A few minutes later he returned to the lounge bar, feeling more level-headed and even ashamed of himself. He shouldn't have been cranky with his wife; this was all difficult for her, too. As he retook his seat, he opened his mouth to apologise…but then he noticed two things at the same time.

First, the older man in the corner had finished his drink and left the pub. Second, a piece of paper with notes scribbled upon it lay on the table in front of Christine.

"What's that?" George asked, reaching forward to pick up the sheet. There was a man's name on the page, as well as a telephone number and an address in nearby Malton, a small town on the route back to Leeds. All the text was in his wife's handwriting.

George glanced up at Christine, who now looked as apologetic as he still felt.

"You seemed so interested in that place," she said, clearly alluding to the foghorn building she hadn't wanted him to enter earlier. "I pressed the miserable bugger in the corner and got this information out of him. The guy named on that sheet once worked there, apparently. Our shy friend and he used to drink here together years ago, until the latter moved inland. They still keep in touch from time to time. Anyway, the local reckons that if you

want to know more about that property, you can get the full story from… what's the fella's name again?"

"Henry Gamble," George replied, reading it from the paper. But then he looked up, eyes full of fear and admiration. "You…told him about my illness, didn't you?"

To her credit, Christine held his stare. "I had no choice, George. Even after I explained how much it would mean to you, he still seemed reluctant to tell me anything. In fact, as soon as I'd written all that down, he left – in quite a hurry, actually."

CHAPTER THREE

The holiday cottage overlooked the port and had a balcony at the front, where George had spent plenty of time over the weekend, catching up with correspondence on his laptop. By the time he and Christine returned from the pub, it was nine o'clock, the night dark, crisp and cool. Stars shone down with single-minded intensity and the moon was a lopsided grin above the North Sea. Now out of the tourist season, it was quiet here, just the constant hiss of water fondling rocks out of view, where shadows coalesced beyond the concrete plateau leading to this isolated property.

When his wife removed the key from her handbag and poked it into the lock, George held back, thinking about time and progress, how the heavens turned and the earth hurtled through imponderable space. Admittedly, he'd enjoyed a few glasses of wine this evening, but that was something else which now had no consequence.

"You know what, Christine?" he said, once his wife had unlocked the door. "I'm going to have another drink out here – maybe one of those beers we brought along. Fancy joining me?"

Christine, nearing sixty herself, struggled to suppress a yawn. "I'm tired from our walk today, George. But you go ahead. In fact," she added, possibly mindful of what she'd shown him in the pub on her phone, "I'll fetch you one out with your tablets. How about that?"

"I'd say that was very kind," he replied, smiling just as she had. Friction rarely lasted long between them, and that always made him feel grateful. But as Christine entered the building, he gave voice to what he told himself had been an afterthought, despite knowing privately that it wasn't. "Can you bring out my laptop, too? I want to check my email."

His wife had encouraged him to maintain friendships with colleagues still working in academia. What with the children living at a distance –

David, thirty-three, in London, where he practised as a solicitor; Vanessa only a year younger, over in Paris working in the fashion industry – she was possibly eager to share out the supervisory duties proposed by Dr. Kilroy.

But he was being suspicious again. By the time his wife had brought out the beer – frothy and cloudy in a pint glass – and his travel-sized laptop, George felt rather mellow, the wine he'd consumed performing its usual magic and ready for a new influx of toxins. The medication he had to take would have no impact on this unusually fine mood.

"I won't be long, darling," he said as Christine retreated, but the glance she turned to offer looked so forlorn that he considered what he'd just said: *I won't be long*. This had been too true for comfort, and so he smiled again as his wife shut herself inside. Then he was free for mischief.

Except that he wasn't up to anything she'd disapprove of, was he? Indeed, she'd provided the first clue in his quest to find out what had happened to that foghorn building. He'd pushed the piece of paper bearing the man's name, address and telephone number into his trouser pocket, but didn't think he would need it yet. He also ignored a lingering impression that the guy who'd provided this information had looked disturbed at the mention of the property. Like the rigorous scientist he'd been for many years, George should make no assumptions about the case before assessing all available evidence. And what better way to start than trawling the Internet, a great leviathan with tentacles sunk in every port around the world?

Taking a long drink of beer, he switched on his laptop, which took only seconds to boot up. He recalled how similar machines in the past had needed several minutes to load, and that youthful period, with so many vivid memories connected to it, felt frighteningly close, even though decades had passed. But none of this thinking would help him to acquire facts. He needed to go online and lose himself in research.

The nearby sea, whose tide squirmed like something furtive, swam in his skull, reminding him of the episode he'd experienced inside that foghorn building. Had this been just another symptom of his brain tumour, rendering experience unreal? But deep down he knew it had been different, as if the problem had occurred *outside* of him. That made as little sense as the damage the building had sustained, but there the sensation stood

anyway, unwilling to be dismissed. It was why he'd decided not to tell Christine about it.

As soon as his browser opened, he typed "Whitby foghorn" into the search engine. He knew from experience that the complex algorithms involved in calculating results worked best when straightforward terms were used. That held true on this occasion. At the head of a list of links, all delivered in lightning-quick time, was a site whose strap-line read:

"*Whitby's old Lighthouse, Fog Horn and their history*".

Taking another drink of beer, the sound mimicking the sea's sinuous noises, George clicked on this link and was transported to a webpage boasting several photos in both colour and black-and-white. Some were of the lighthouse he and Christine had passed today, the others of that foghorn building. The second bunch included the latter property in operation, with two burly young men standing outside it, one with blond hair and the other ginger. Judging by their flared trousers and wide-collared shirts, the photo had been taken in the 1970s, each man appearing serious and committed to their responsible work. Scrolling down the page, George noticed another shot of the foghorn building, this time looking neglected, as he'd observed it today, its stonework growing islands of moss.

He quickly learnt about the lighthouse, understanding that, after being built in the nineteenth century, it was still in commission and staffed by a small number of staff. But despite this useful background information, he was less interested in *that* place.

Next he turned to the written material about that out-of-action foghorn property.

Slurping more from his pint, he heard the sky grumble, as if his act of knowledge acquisition had upset the interests of some irascible God. Reminded that he and deities were on far from good terms right now, he moved rapidly on, reading the entry in seconds.

In 1856, two one-acre coastal plots were purchased on the northeast coastline and a lighthouse was built on both. But the larger was soon demolished and replaced by a foghorn station, which began operating in 1902. This was officially called the Whitby Fog Signal and Dwelling, and unofficially "the Bull". It was a single-storey stone building, the foghorn sharing the flat roof with chimneypots. Its sound travelled at such a low

velocity that just as people in Whitby, two miles away, heard the first blast of the horn, it was issuing its third back on the site. Further afield, residents of a village nearby heard the first blast when the siren had completed its fourth. It must have made a tremendous noise, living up to its informal name (the Bull). Sadly, the Whitby foghorn was decommissioned in 1975 after severe subsidence on the cliff-top where it is located led to irreparable structural damage.

Severe subsidence leading to structural damage – who was the author trying to fool? The problems suffered by the building hadn't come from beneath it, from the ground close to the cliff-edge; they'd been inflicted from the front, as if something immense had crashed into the place.

George closed this amateur website and started searching for more information. But after fifteen more minutes, he was forced to admit that little else was available, just a few references by holidaymakers, each saying how charming the place was and what a shame that it was no longer operational. Clearly none had gone inside and seen what he'd observed. If any had, they'd surely have shared his suspicions.

Recalling the way that the guy in the pub had responded when he'd mentioned the property, George wondered what had gone on there. A brief search relating to newsworthy events near Whitby in 1975 – the year in which the place had been closed – proved inconclusive. There'd been a flood in late March, but that had occurred several miles along the coast. It was unlikely that seawater, whipped into a frenzy by even the wildest winds, could cause so much damage high on the cliff-side.

Taking his drink again and closing his laptop, George felt tiredness wash over him. He looked up into a cloying darkness illuminated by the moon and stars. Something scrabbled among rocks out of view, but he knew this was just the tide mimicking the sound of restless limbs clawing for the land.

He stood, left his pint unfinished on the table, and then collected his computer. Before entering the holiday cottage, he imagined that once functioning foghorn, crying along the coastline like some vicious animal – a bull perhaps – which soon charged powerfully for its destination. Its call was so thunderous that even time had been affected, with residents hearing its assault only once it had done its considerable worst to the area.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night his dreams were full of troubling imagery, just as they had been so often lately. The landscapes felt like sensory illusions induced by clever technicians or by the world wriggling out of his mental grasp. At first, there were towers, stacked as high as great trees, sides oozing greenish liquids. These were followed by immense blocks laid out in such complex profusion that portals had formed between them, each stuffed with twitching shadow. George heard water splashing in every direction, which only dramatized the visual aspects of the territory up ahead, an ever-changing mass of non-compatible objects. He reached for a hole in the ground, but it shifted at once, eluding the spatial calculations of his intuitive body. Now this opening lay to his left, as if compass directions in such a remote place had been rearranged by some nefarious inhabitant. At that moment, at the peak of what appeared to be a feisty volcano, immense sounds arose, coupled with a powerful scent of cattle crammed into too small a space. Huge rocks, each lacking the amorphous shapes of nature, were soon cast out of the elevated pit, describing impossible trajectories across a sky full of storm clouds, and landing yards away from where gravity might prompt observers to predict. These were more of the symmetrical objects that constituted the environment, as if similar eruptions were common and the thing triggering them full of bullish rage. Seconds later, as George stepped forwards, or rather at an undesired diagonal, he saw something emerge up ahead…something hideously organic amid so much sculpted terrain…something vast and green and monstrous…

CHAPTER FIVE

He awoke feeling terrified. This sensation was enhanced when he turned over in bed and found nobody lying beside him. The experience felt like death, an event almost always confronted alone. The sheer force of his nightmare, with all its weird events, left him reeling with bleak impressions. He was thankful that his wife wasn't here, in this unfamiliar bedroom. He might have just acted out his anxieties again, thrashing around in the sheets and leaving them in a maelstrom of disorder.

His panic soon passed, allowing him to get up to wash and dress. He found Christine in the cottage's kitchen, poaching eggs in a pan and toasting bread under the grill. He wished her good morning, feeling reluctant to tell her about what he'd experienced overnight. Sitting at the dining table, he noticed that his wife had packed the case in which they'd brought along clothing and foodstuff.

After eating and discussing neutral matters, they washed up together. Then it was time to leave. George exited first, carrying the case to the car parked in front of the balcony he'd occupied last night. It was now that he spotted the pint glass he'd left outside. It had a fat slug clinging to its side, hanging just over the rim, as if it had laboured hard to reach this far.

George didn't like the look of the thing – its bloated body bulged and squirmed, oozing an opaque substance that reminded him of things he'd rather not contemplate – and so, after placing the case in the car's boot, he returned to grab the glass by its bottom before shoving it in a dustbin near the garden gate. When Christine appeared moments later, he acted innocent and distracted; she abhorred cruelty to living creatures and would have rebuked him if she'd witnessed what he'd just done.

By the time they'd reached the A-road back to Leeds, he tackled the issue which had been gnawing at him all morning. Once a sign announcing

Malton appeared up ahead, he turned to glance at his wife.

“You don’t mind if we stop off somewhere on the way back, do you? I…want to follow up on that contact you acquired for me – you know, from that evasive guy in the pub.”

He wasn’t sure why he felt edgy about having an interest in the foghorn building, but the fact was that he did. Maybe he was aware of a subconscious connection between what he’d experienced inside the property and his dreams last night. Whatever the truth was, he knew there was only one way of resolving his concerns: gather together as much knowledge as possible.

Christine had just removed her iPhone from her handbag, and although George blanched at the sight (imagining that she meant to use its camera again), he quickly noticed that she had its screen switched to a novel she’d been reading, the kind of dense literary work she relished and he lacked patience for.

“I’m already prepared for that,” she explained. “I’ll wait in the car while you go inside and have a chat.”

On reaching a roundabout, George took an earlier turning than one leading back to Leeds and steered through a quiet, residential area.

“I wouldn’t get too settled,” he said, braking at traffic lights near the heart of the town. “Henry Gamble might not even be home today.”

“Oh, he’ll be there.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I called him this morning, while you were sleeping,” his wife replied, smiling and winking with typical knowingness. “In fact, he’s expecting you.”

She rarely ceased to surprise him and he loved her for that. But right now, he had a more pressing matter to attend to. Obeying his satnav’s instructions, he soon pulled up in front of a semi-detached property in a street full of them. Smartly decorated facades and neatly tended gardens suggested their residents’ respectable natures, and as George exited the vehicle, promising Christine that he wouldn’t be long, he felt confident enough to advance up the path and deliver a firm knock at the door.

Moments later his summons were answered by a man slightly older than himself. Once George had introduced himself, the guy smiled in a strained way and then let him inside. George was led through to a lounge in

which, clearly prompted by Christine's call that morning, the man had prepared juice in glasses. He was invited to sit in an armchair near the window, while Henry (as the man had insisted on being called) claimed another directly opposite, where daylight fell onto his face like some interrogatory lamp.

After brief pleasantries concerning the weather and some toothless politics, George got down to business. He told Henry about chancing upon the foghorn building and his amateur investigations. He mentioned the man in the pub the previous evening, especially how George had found him evasive. He said nothing about his experiences inside the property, let alone anything about his illness and the symptoms in which it could manifest. He doubted that was relevant anyway.

Once this brief account was over, the homeowner took a long drink, prompting George to do the same. The juice was freshly squeezed orange, full of stringy pulp. But that was when George's attention was drawn to Henry's words.

"Malcolm Harp is an old friend of mine. We used to drink together, me and him, when I lived over in Whitby."

So this – Malcolm Harp – was George's first informant, the man Christine had probed for Henry's contact details. Everything was falling into place, key subjects being named; surely now the full story would unfold.

"Most of what I have to tell you happened years ago, and although it greatly troubled me at the time, I doubt I've thought about it for over a decade. In fact, your wife's call this morning came as a surprise. I agreed to you visiting before I'd had chance to think about it. But that's okay, I suppose. Now that you're here, you might as well hear what I have to say. It's been such a long time since it all happened. I'm…I'm sure it can't lead to any more problems."

Greatly troubled – what had the man meant by this? And what "problems" had he referred to? George began to feel uneasy and hoped he wasn't about to experience another of his episodes, especially not in a stranger's home. But then he leaned back in his chair and prepared to listen to more.

"It all started with the bottle me and my colleague found embedded in the cliff-side," Henry explained, running one hand across his balding scalp.

Almost white at the temples, he'd probably once been blond, and that certainly fitted with the photograph George had spotted on the website devoted to the Whitby lighthouse and that foghorn building. And by "colleague", had Henry just referred to the other guy – the one with ginger hair? George thought that must be the case.

"What was this bottle?" he said, hoping he wouldn't need to keep Henry talking. "And who was the other person you mentioned?"

His informant eyed him for a moment, as if trying to work out whether he could be trusted, but then, after a brief exhalation, he said, "His name was Jens Amundsen, a Norwegian working in the UK. He was a bit of a poet and a dreamer, but cheerful enough and always likeable. It was also fortunate that he was from Norway, because that was the language the message was written in."

"What message?" asked George, and gulped more from his juice, wishing it was something stronger.

"Well, it was more than a message. In fact, what we found inside that corked bottle buried in mud just below the cliff-top where the foghorn building stands – the place we both called home at the time – was a *whole manuscript*."

George thought for several seconds, but then said, "I don't get it. What has a manuscript to do with that property, let alone the damage it sustained?"

"I'll get to that," Henry replied, eyes failing to meet George's. "Believe me, I'll get to that soon enough. But first you should know some background information."

If George had the impression that the man now regretted agreeing to speak about the past, he hoped he'd come too far to back out. Indeed, Henry soon started speaking again.

"When we both got jobs operating that foghorn back in the early '70s, I was twenty and Jens just a bit older. We were young and stupid, as most men are at that age, but we got on well enough, sharing an interest in beer, girls and books. Lord knows what the appeal of the place was, with little to stimulate us for miles around, but it was a paid job in a lovely place, so we didn't complain too much.

"Jens had come over to England as a kid with his family, and had lived in the northeast ever since. I grew up in York, but had fled as soon as I

could, because I hadn't got on with my parents, nor my snotty siblings. I was a bit of a black sheep, and I guess this – what with Jens being a foreigner in a country just getting used to migrants – was another connection between us. So yeah, we became fast friends, operating that rowdy foghorn, sharing the shifts, attending to the engines – Jens was a gifted mechanic, me a quick learner – and generally mucking around together.

"But after a few months – this was in 1975 – I learnt something new about the man. And I wasn't sure I liked it."

Henry paused, ostensibly seeking lubrication from his orange juice, even though George suspected that he felt uncomfortable about what he planned to add, as if simply telling the story had evoked troubling memories he'd long considered dormant. When he went on, Henry's voice developed a tremulous quality.

"It was about the time when we found the bottle, the one carrying the manuscript written in Norwegian. You'll remember that Jens and I liked books. These were one of the few things that kept us sane in such coastal seclusion. But while I was fond of predictable stuff for a young man – pulp novels, sports magazines, car manuals – Jens preferred…well, how can I best describe it? Esoteric literature – is that the right word? I'm talking weird books. And I mean *seriously* weird.

"I have no idea what the manuscript we found was concerned with, because Jens never told me. All I do know is that he read it from front to back and then all over again, until it must have become lodged word-for-word in his brain. One night, while he slept, I crept into his room to take a look at the document, finding just a bundle of yellowed pages with messy handwriting on them. But other than a date – 1926, presumably when it was written – I recognised only a name at the end. *Gustaf Johansen*, its author appeared to be called.

"From that period onwards, Jens spent a lot of time travelling, without saying where he went. One day I found bus tickets in his pockets and worked out that he was journeying back to Newcastle, probably because it had better resources than local places. Sometimes he'd mutter comments about libraries and information stored there, but that was all he'd say – nothing about what he'd been searching for.

“When he was out, inquisitiveness sometimes got the better of me and I’d snoop around his room, looking at the books he’d acquired since developing his obsession with the manuscript. But all I found among scribbled notes and underlined passages seemed like gibberish to me, just mad material about ancient creatures that were supposed to have occupied earth long before humans had. This was the stuff of cheap science fiction even I wouldn’t bother reading.”

Henry paused again, this time draining his glass in a single swallow and with such a needy expression that George imagined the man also now wished the drink contained alcohol. George heard a clock ticking on the mantelpiece above an unlit fire, a perception that affected him more than he felt comfortable with. Mindful of his failing health, as well as his wife waiting in the car, he wished the homeowner would get to the heart of his tale, revealing the information that George, for a reason he’d yet to work out, wanted to know. What had happened to that foghorn building?

It wasn’t long before the man recommenced his narrative.

“Whenever I was out in the area – maybe drinking in pubs with Malcolm Harp, a fisherman I’d got to know and the reason you’re here today, my friend – it turned out that Jens had been back in the foghorn building *conducting terrible spells.*

“I caught him once, having come back early from a heavy session. He’d peeled back one of the carpets and drawn a giant five-pointed star on the floorboards – what do you call them? A pentagram, isn’t it? Anyway, he had all these candles burning and a heavy book open in front of him. And he was saying weird stuff I couldn’t even pronounce. I’m sure one of the words – which I often heard him repeat – was something like *cuff-who-loo*. But I was in no mood to join in. The truth was that I was scared. I asked him what the hell he was doing. He didn’t dignify me with even a reply, let alone an explanation.

“From that day onwards – this was late-winter, early 1975 – we didn’t mention that episode again. But before long, sometimes when we’d invited girls back from Whitby and got drunk while off-duty, Jens drew us into his bizarre schemes. One night – just for fun, he said – he persuaded us all to participate in a kind of chant, which involved repeating more crazy words while he did stuff on the floor with candles and powders. Don’t ask me why I took part, especially after what I’d learnt about his preoccupations.

Perhaps I was just interested in the girls, who seemed keen and amused enough to dabble in such nonsense.

"I'm not going to tell you that I saw or heard anything unusual that evening, because I was very drunk. I might have imagined anything – I mean, stuff in my head could have become confused with reality. But even so, I have the impression of sensing something nearby, maybe through the windows of the room we occupied, one looking on to the North Sea.

"I really can't explain it, man. It might have been just a scent I detected. Or it could have been a belief that an object – something soft and long – was attempting to clutch at the glass, like a snake's head or a creature much slimier than that. But that was impossible, because we were so far up from the beach below. Surely nothing so big could have stood on the small lip between the building and that great drop.

"And then there was the foghorn's noise. On several misty nights after the one I've just mentioned, whenever we set it off every ninety seconds – four clear blasts across the moonlit waters – it sounded like a…well, like a *monster* out there, assaulting the coasts with a tremendous roar. I don't know if you're aware that the thing had a nickname…"

"The Bull?" said George, cutting into this narrative to reassure himself of his presence, as if doing otherwise would result in him becoming lost in the tale, getting sucked into a fantasy. His dreams sometimes felt similar, as if he was merely imagining his existence. But surely this was just another symptom of his medical condition.

"That's right, the *Bull*," Henry said, raising his glass to drink but then realising it was empty and putting it back down. "It gave off a brutal noise, pal. We got used to it after a while, but we were far from popular with people living nearby, especially during times of the year when poor weather led to regular use. Late-winter was one of them…and it was just after this period that *it* happened."

George lifted his own glass but didn't drink from it. "*What* did?" he asked, transfixed by the tale, despite its unremarkable origin, just an abandoned building on a distant English coastline.

"I'm sorry to build to such an anti-climax," Henry went on, shaking his once blond head, "but the truth is that I'm not sure. All I do know is that one day I went for a short break inland to Leeds, enjoying the nightspots there, and the next I returned…to find Jens Amundsen gone."

“Gone?”

“Yes. But that’s not all.”

“Please continue.”

“I do mean to, my friend.” Henry drew a sharp breath and soon added in a quavering voice, “All the windows at the front of the building had been smashed and the walls appeared to have been bent inwards, as if…well, as if something had struck the building from the other side. A load of plaster was missing from the wall opposite, too. But Lord, what sense does any of *that* make?”

George nodded with irrepressible haste. “That’s just what *I* saw, after I’d accessed that property. I looked it all up online later and the official view is that the place had been closed because of *severe subsidence*.”

“Ha!” Henry responded with an incredulous scoff. “What nonsense!”

“I quite agree,” said George, laying aside his sloshing glass. “So what *did* happen there, Henry?”

The man’s eyes again evaded George’s, staring beyond him out of his front window, where Christine patiently waited. “I don’t know, mate. But I’ll tell you this much. When I got back that day – this was late March, a period of heavy storms that year – I found another of those chalk pentagrams on the front room’s floor, and all Jens’s books scattered at the centre of it, and various powders and guttered candles and Christ knows what other weird stuff. And yet…*Jens Amunsen was gone*. Do I need to say more?”

It was certainly an unsettling story, but George was unwilling to jump to conclusions. “What did you do next? I mean, you presumably informed the authorities?”

“I did. And soon – as the foghorn no longer functioned in such a compromised state – I had no choice but to move away, seeking alternative work. I got a job in printing here in Malton and just tried to get on with life. I followed events relating to the case in the local news for weeks afterwards, and the police interviewed me. But then it all went hush-hush. Whitby is hardly a focus of national media, and a missing person – especially a foreigner – failed to hold even residents’ attention for long.

“I should also tell you that I, shall we say, tidied that property after discovering whatever Jens had been up to. I mean, I scrubbed away that five-pointed star and got rid of all the other crazy gear. What can I say? I

still had my reputation to uphold. I needed work. I couldn't be seen to have been involved in anything so…well, *weird*.

"And so the mystery eventually subsided. Besides, everyone was busy at that time dealing with the floods. Did you read about them, too? How the town was badly affected?"

Before George could reply with even a nod, Henry added more.

"That happened the *same night* my good friend disappeared."

The room went silent, allowing George time to absorb this latest information. What was his informant trying to tell him without explicitly setting out the facts? Maybe that his old friend, an enigmatic Norwegian with an interest in the dark arts, had summoned some *thing* to the UK's coastland and had been snatched away by it? That this entity had been big enough not only to cause damage to a cliff-top building but also to flood a port miles from its destination? And that this hideous intruder boasted a name that sounded something like "*cuff-who-loo*"?

Possessing no answers to these questions, George felt his mind whirling with so much new knowledge. He watched as Henry got up from his chair and crossed the room. The homeowner stooped to open a cupboard in one corner, reached inside, and pulled out a small item made of glass. Within lay something composed of off-colour paper with handwriting upon it: an old manuscript.

"As soon as I talked to your wife this morning, I realised it was time to get rid of this thing," said Henry, carrying the bottle to George and handing it over. "It was the only item I preserved back then. I've kept it in my attic ever since and retrieved it only about an hour ago. As I want nothing more to do with this matter, this is yours if you want it: the words that led my colleague Jens Amundsen to some kind of damnation."

CHAPTER SIX

George and Christine had arranged a world tour taking in every continent. They would begin in Europe, with the quiet elegance of Stockholm; move on to Africa and the tribal complexities of Ghana; take in the Middle East and the exotic chasteness of Saudi Arabia; endure a long flight to New Zealand to sample the city of Auckland; venture into Chile and its majestic Andes; and finally travel to New Orleans and its jazz-enlivened quarters. Then they'd come home, a month after departure.

But first George had a mystery to solve.

He sat at his dining table with two items in front of him: his laptop logged onto the Internet; and the manuscript two men had found in a bottle back in 1975, which had, to judge by the date of composition in one upper corner, been cast across the North Sea from Norway approximately fifty years earlier.

The document began with a brief paragraph in Norwegian:

Jeg har berettet om denne hendelsen to ganger før; en gang på engelsk for å beskytte min kone for uant kjennskap. Jeg er klar over at folk som vet så mye som meg ikke pleier å leve lenge. Av den grunn skriver jeg dette brev på mitt morsmål i håp om at min historie en dag skal bli forstått. Jeg skal la skjebnen bestemme hvem som ender opp med å lese dette. Jeg håper at de kommende hendelser i verden ender bedre enn hva jeg uheldigvis tror. Dette dokumentet er avslørende, for jeg har sett det. Jeg vet hvilke grusomheter som venter oss alle. Gud vet at jeg er redd. Din tjener – Gustav Johansen.

After typing this text into an online translation site, George was rewarded with an English passage that lacked nuance but whose meaning appeared to be:

…written account twice, once in English…protect wife from forbidden knowledge…people who know as much as I do not live long…make this copy in native language…hope story heard one day…cast it adrift…let fate decide who falls upon it…hope events kinder to it than what may trouble the world…I've seen It…horrors await us all…very frightened…Your wary servant – Gustaf Johansen

In light of everything George had learned lately, this was intriguing – the line about the author having "seen It" was particularly suggestive – but to understand more, he needed access to the whole manuscript. Translation via a similarly crude method would do it a disservice and might even lead to misunderstandings. But there was a way of ensuring accuracy, and one to which George, with his academic contacts, had access. The document was eight pages in length and shouldn't take long to render into English. He knew a guy at his former university who might help.

After emailing this man and asking if he had time free to work on the material, George switched his attention back to enquiries about that foghorn building, whose history his informant in Malton – Henry Gamble – had only partially alluded to. The man's account, a near-hysterical sequence of events ending with no firm conclusions, had conveyed enough hints for a researcher to sink metaphorical teeth into.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, and George's wife was watching TV in the next room. Since returning from the northeast several days earlier, George had experienced no further complications from his condition, and his dreams, still strained at times, had involved no more of those weird landscapes boasting impossible geometries. In hindsight, he'd assigned those imaginings to the stress involved in adjusting to a new period of life, free from occupational responsibilities and with few opportunities to focus on involving tasks. But that was no longer true. Even Christine had encouraged him to take an interest in this mystery, in a suspiciously silenced event in Whitby's recent past.

He typed key words into his search engine and then clicked Find. After spending time reading about the town's history, he chanced upon relevant information about the storm of 1975, when the port had flooded during an evening of fierce rainfall and choppy winds. The most interesting fact about this episode was that only Whitby on the northeast coast had been affected badly. Neither Redcar to the north nor Scarborough to the south had

suffered the kind of damage that had closed shops for days and reduced residential properties to sodden ruins.

On the same night, which had occurred towards the end of March, residents of the town had reported hearing the famous foghorn, that rampant Bull, roaring along the coastline. But some suggested that it had sounded different, as if the regular rhythm was altered and it had gone off at random across a range of pitches. George could only suppose that, as visibility would have been poor that evening and the man operating the foghorn was distracted, the engines had been neglected, resulting in such a bestial cacophony. George could almost hear the thing now, resembling masses of cattle under protest, the throaty rumble of a huge body with incredibly deep lungs. Weather-affected acoustics over the sea had rendered its sound more resonant, and that strange delaying effect, as if time had been destabilised, made a mockery of all listeners' expectations.

So plenty of other things had occurred elsewhere on the night Jens Amundsen had disappeared. Had the local authority and other bodies – the police or fire service, perhaps – been involved in an elaborate cover-up? That was the only conclusion which made sense. After all, the notion that the building had sustained damage caused by subsidence was ludicrous, just as Henry Gamble believed. How had local officials got away with it? More pertinently, why had they lied? Did someone know more than had been publically admitted? Or had surveyors or insurers grown afraid of implications presented by those high buckled walls and all that broken plaster, keeping the case secret and hoping any associated furore would quickly die away?

George recalled Henry claiming that although he'd been estranged from his family, his colleague Jens had relatives living in the UK. Surely at least one of them had wanted to learn more about the man's disappearance. But George – despite using the Norwegian's name to search specific websites, including that of Whitby's only newspaper, the *Gazette* – was unable to locate further information about the missing man.

Perhaps he'd have better luck with some of the more speculative elements of the story he'd heard in Malton. Hadn't his informant mentioned some sort of spell his ex-colleague had performed, or even the thing he'd tried conjuring with weird magic? As George reflected on this matter, a peculiar word returned to him, one almost unpronounceable and constructed from seemingly mismatching syllables: "*cuff-who-loo*".

Expecting the effort to lead nowhere, George typed this non-word into the search engine and hit Return.

He was right: it led nowhere, producing just a haphazard list of links bearing little or no relation to one another. All the same, amid a number of knitting patterns (presumably generated by “cuff”) and plumbing guides (prompted by the crudely informal “loo”), there was a single entry that intrigued George.

Great Old Ones and their advocates

…the correct pronunciation of the mythical creature “Cthulhu” is thought to closely resemble “cuff who loo”…

He clicked at once on this link and was transported to a website dedicated to what appeared to be ancient entities – so old that they predated humankind – which supposedly slumbered in hidden parts of the world. They were dormant but not dead, awaiting revival by two essential triggers: the stars in the heavens “being right” and certain spells being enacted by people with whom these “Great Old Ones” had communicated via dreams. Their leader was allegedly called *Cthulhu*.

It was all hokum, of course, but even so George found it compelling. He spent half an hour reading about an expert on this controversial mythology, a Professor Lovecraft who’d worked between 1910 and 1935 at Miskatonic University in Massachusetts, North America.

With a respectable academic involved, George felt that he could take this material seriously and soon learnt more about Professor Lovecraft’s discoveries. These included a period of inclement weather conditions back in the winter of 1925 during which a great many artists and poets (as well as the clinically insane) had experienced convergent dreams about a bizarre semiaquatic creature and its current location, a sunken island called R’lyeh situated somewhere in the South Pacific.

George hesitated, recalling his own dream of a few nights ago, the one in which all the geometry had been at fault and some hideous *thing* had been about to erupt from a volcanic structure composed of improbable symmetrical blocks.

Was there a connection here? Had the dark arts practiced by Jens Amundsen left residual traces that might be picked up by sensitive brains or perhaps ones suffering ailments? Had George been violated by a lingering spell that had once summoned a Great Old One to England’s coastline,

when this *thing* had smashed against that property before taking its supplicant away?

But this was all ridiculous, the stuff of tawdry science fiction, just as Henry Gamble had claimed. All the same, as George read more about Professor Lovecraft's research, he couldn't help feeling increasingly uncomfortable.

There was further material about black magic rites conducted in the deep south of North America, among the voodoo regions of Louisiana. There were allusions to stone carvings representing Cthulhu, each sculpted by craftsmen who'd suffered those same dark dreams in the 1920s. There was talk of Eskimo tribes in which priest-wizards – *angekoks* – invoked devils – *tornasuks* – whose descriptions, passed down by word of mouth across generations, shared uncanny similarities to the Great Old Ones depicted in other cultures. There were chants and rituals codified in indecipherable prose. There was information about how these ancient creatures, all composed of non-organic tissue that allowed them to travel without conventional restrictions, had arrived on earth many millennia before humans, how they'd since been buried and were now held in slumber by powerful spells. But one day, it was claimed, when the heavens decreed that the time was right, their great leader would rise again, bringing many more with It, and the whole world would be turned to fire, freeing all people to commit violent acts in an unfettered orgy.

Intersecting the text were photographs, at least two showing sculpted carvings and another an artist's sketch in pencil. Each supposedly depicted great Cthulhu, a vast creature boasting immense claws, multiple face tentacles, and vast wings affixed to its back. There was little context by which to judge the size of this entity, but whatever its dimensions were, it looked unspeakably unpleasant. Its flesh was greenish and its body immense, but it was the head that bothered George most, with so many rubberlike tubes shooting away from its circumference: appendages that surely might push through a building's windows and break plaster from the room's far wall.

He refused to think about this for long; he had more reading to do. The academic's account ended with an observation that linked back to the manuscript George still had on the table beside his laptop. It was apparently true that anyone in possession of too much knowledge about the Great Old Ones suffered a premature demise.

George looked away from his screen and thought of Gustaf Johansen, who'd written words suggesting that "people who know as much as [him] do not live long". The man had gone as far as composing two accounts of the same experience, one in English to save his wife from such "forbidden knowledge" and the other in Norwegian in the hope of someone chancing upon it and being warned about "what horrors await us all", something that had certainly "frightened" him.

Someone *had* eventually chanced upon the latter document: Jens Amunden, a fellow Norwegian, who'd read the chronicle and then acted upon its content, drawing on an existing interest in the dark arts in a foolhardy attempt to summon unspeakable entities from some age-old void.

Pulling away from his screen, George found it difficult not to take a last glance at the webpage. At the foot of the account of Professor Lovecraft's research findings, he read a single troubling phrase:

In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.

CHAPTER SEVEN

That night George suffered the dream again, the one in which he occupied a strange terrain where nothing behaved as it should in a Newtonian world with familiar laws of cause and effect. He awoke thrashing in the sheets, and on this occasion Christine was laid beside him and had to calm him down. Eventually she asked if he'd experienced another of his episodes.

George, feeling paranoid from the unsettling power of his nightmare, briefly wondered why his wife hadn't used her iPhone to record his behaviour, but then felt grateful for her intervention. He couldn't imagine facing this horror alone, being at the mercy of a universe that greeted his inevitable death with only an indifferent stare from its countless star-like eyes.

Once they'd eaten breakfast together, exchanging strained small-talk the way they often did in troubling times, George was back at his computer and first checking the news headlines. World affairs remained as tenuous as they'd been during his lifetime. China's rise to global economic domination continued to be compromised by its Communist infrastructure, leading to mass demonstrations and riots. There was further conflict between Israel and Palestine, while Kuwait had again become a hotbed of political activity, decades after the two Gulf Wars. The Eurozone had suffered more problems arising from uneven performances between its industrious north – successful Germany – and decadent south, especially the perpetually unstable Spain and Italy. In the Far East, North Korea had been "sabre-rattling" with nuclear weapons, to such a degree that indefatigable USA had flexed more of its ageing muscles.

This was the usual hodgepodge of international friction, and although it cast a shadow over George and Christine's imminent world tour, none of

it told him what he wanted to know. For that, he needed to check for emails and make a phone call.

He started with the messages, opening his inbox and hoping for a reply from his former colleague, the one fluent in Norwegian. Indeed, here it was, instructing George to send over the material in need of transcription, which the guy, who soon had a holiday booked, could tackle reasonably quickly. George spent time scanning the manuscript written long ago by Gustaf Johansen and mailed off the file as an attachment, expressing gratitude to the academic. George hoped the man hadn't merely taken pity on him, that he'd have done the same favour in other circumstances. But he didn't let this trouble him for long.

He waited until his wife had gone upstairs before dialling the number he'd found online. Robin Hood's Bay had plenty of pubs, but despite his mental unrest lately, George recalled the name of the one in which he and Christine had dined prior to leaving for home. More crucially, he remembered the name of the man who'd offered his wife a crucial lead, which had taken George to Malton to hear Henry Gamble's curious story. The coast-dwelling guy was called Malcolm Harp and was obviously a devotee of all things alcoholic. George hoped he'd be drinking in the pub now.

He spoke to a barmaid first, maybe even the same one who'd served him that evening. After he'd asked for the man by name, the woman told him to hold the line, presumably while she roused her client from his usual corner. Seconds later a gravelly voice came on the line.

"Hello. Malcolm speaking. Who's this?"

George identified himself and then mentioned Henry in Malton, realising that if his latest informant knew his old friend had communicated with George, there was little harm in doing similar. After wary, even apprehensive grumbles, the man agreed to speak to George, but only later, in private, from his own home.

George wondered what could be so troubling that Malcolm Harp needed to be away from public view to discuss it. But then he heard his wife descend from upstairs and enter the lounge, smiling in the sympathetic way that was beginning to irritate him.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked. In any other situation, this would be an innocent, even polite, question. But in the current one, it only

heightened George's mounting frustration.

"I'm *fine*," he said, trying to keep emphasis off the second word and yet failing. A moment later, feeling bad about his reaction, he added, "I'm just about to call somebody else about that foghorn building."

"That place has really got a grip on you, hasn't it?"

"What do you mean, *grip*?" he asked, some of his impatience returning.

Christine stared at him, as if unsure what to say. George knew she'd meant her comment conversationally and hadn't been passing judgement on his developing obsession. All the same, he believed that she'd identified something he struggled to admit to himself. This case *was* taking hold of him, in pitiable contrast to its possibly unsensational nature. He'd begun to wonder whether he was seeking ghosts or maybe evidence of some other realm in the cosmos, where he was about to travel before long. In this sense, his preoccupation made absolute sense, even though he somehow knew that his investigations were ultimately likely to be a damp-squib.

Such insights had once been a regular part of his daily working life and it was characteristic of him to identify these underlying motivations. The tumour in his skull might also be driving his intense activity, a wish to know more than could be known, to grapple with the impossible. After all, he'd been a social scientist for many years and now had no more than a few left.

After long seconds of silence, George exhaled sharply. "Oh look, I'm sorry, my love. I don't mean to be rude. It's just that…well, I'm in the middle of something important, and as you know, I always get a bit insular during my projects."

Christine stepped across to offer a hug, which he immediately accepted, enjoying the warmth she'd always imparted.

"I'm just pleased that you're able to focus on something positive," she said, and after she'd set him free, he wondered whether the word "positive" could be used accurately in these circumstances.

He'd find out for certain by calling Malcolm Harp. He took his medication and watched Christine head upstairs again, then waited and waited. He strolled around the house, making tea, drinking it, nibbling at biscuits, trawling online again to see if he could discover more about that foghorn building (he found nothing), and then, at three o'clock, the time the

man in Robin Hood's Bay had said he'd be available to speak, he dialled the number he'd been given.

The line connected in seconds, as if the guy was eager to talk to George, or rather wanted to get the conversation over with as quickly as possible.

"Okay, go on," the weary voice said from what felt like a greater distance than the seventy-five miles to the coast, "ask what you need to know and then let me get back to the pub."

The man's acerbic nature was in keeping with that of a lifelong village resident, with such people's limited experience of diversity. In his academic work, George had come across many like him and knew that their lives tended to be driven by routine and a tripartite separation of daily activities: work, recreation, sleep. But George wasn't here to talk psychology. He had a more concrete problem to solve.

"You'll realise, of course, that I'm interested in the foghorn building just a few miles down the coast from your home."

"Your wife told me as much, yes."

"Right. And since talking to your friend Henry Gamble, I've become aware of…well, of certain facts, which don't fit the *official* view, if you follow."

The line went silent for a moment, as if Malcolm was in deep thought. Then he drew an audible breath and replied, "You don't need to bait your hook, my friend. I know exactly what you mean. You're talking about the damage once sustained by that property, aren't you? You want to know about what that Norwegian lunatic summoned back in 1975, yeah?"

What else could George do but be honest? "Yes," he replied, and simply waited for the guy to continue.

Before long, Malcolm did.

"You're not the first person I've told this to – there's Henry, for one. But you'll be the only one I'll have told it *all* to. Yes, the police were involved at the time – it concerned a missing person, after all – but there's only so much a local like me can say without fear of ridicule. If I'd got a reputation for seeing…well, *monsters* out there, in the deep blue sea, my life wouldn't have been worth living. But what the hell – I'm old now. There are no consequences anymore. You might as well hear what I have to tell you."

George, his condition challenging his biological clock even more ruthlessly than his informant's advanced years did his, understood this sentiment. All the same, mindful and even afraid of the man's use of the word "monsters", George said nothing before the guy continued.

"As you know, these events happened in March 1975, on a stormy night which only a madman or someone deep in debt would work. Well, this mad debtor – I mean *me*, of course – did exactly that, taking a boat out into a sea whose waves tossed and churned. I'd sailed a few miles off the coast, hauling up cod and haddock and shrimps: whatever I could sell up in Whitby, all for the tourists' pleasure.

"Anyway, I was maybe a mile from Robin Hood's Bay, headed south, when I suddenly detected a great upheaval behind my boat, like a tidal wave getting up. But that didn't make sense. Although it was a wild night, similar disruptions usually involved far more of them, a great flurry battering me every which way. As I said, this happened just once: a single sweep of water cutting along the coastline, as if something moved that way, leaving a foamy line in the sea.

"That was when I glanced around. Whenever the lighthouse pointed its beam away, as it did right then, there was little illumination, just what came from the stars and moon. At a great distance, I saw the lights of Whitby – windows and streetlamps – twinkling faintly. But then they *all went out*. This wasn't for long, but it was long enough to make me believe that something – some vast, dark, *stinking* thing – had just passed behind the boat, kicking up that wave and then blotting out sight of the town for maybe ten seconds. I remembering imagining that this was what free-floating icebergs must look like at night while passing places where Eskimos live. But surely none had ever moved as fast as this, nor cut up such a fuss in the water.

"That was all I saw, I swear to you, but then, looking back towards the coast as that huge uprising in the sea settled, I noticed that the lighthouse had also been extinguished. At first I assumed there'd been a power outage, but then realised that such places aren't connected to the National Grid. Only human error can result in a lighthouse failure, but, along with Henry and Jens who operated the foghorn, I knew a few of the men who worked there, and they were all professionals. They'd no sooner let that place fail than the other guys would forget to keep the old Bull roaring at night. Which left only one conclusion.

“Whatever had just passed me, wiping out all sight of Whitby, had reached the lighthouse and done the same to that.

“This was confirmed only seconds later, when the lamp reappeared, rippling across the sea with its usual side-to-side sweeping motion. As it moved, I thought I saw something vast and green – like a massive muscle flexing with rage – standing in front of the shadowy land beyond it. But it was raining heavily and that could have been just water in my eyes, making everything look weird. This must also account for a load of limb-like extensions I thought I’d seen sticking out of the top of this thing, like oily tentacles primed to strike. As I say, maybe it was just moisture blurring my vision, making featureless items appear streaky.

“All the same, I felt scared and started puttering faster along the coastline, travelling the five miles back to Robin Hood’s Bay, where I hoped to deal quickly with my day’s catch and get to the pub for a mighty long drink. As I went, I detected a scent on the wind, like a field full of cattle crammed together hide to hide. As a fisherman, I’m used to such strong aromas, but even with that boat full of dead fish, I could smell that stench. It was a sickening mix of animal shit and some vicious sex-smell. Believe me, man, I felt like puking all the way home.

“Maybe only a mile from my destination, I was distracted again, because that was when the foghorn started misfiring – or at least, that’s what I told myself as I put more and more distance between my boat and… well, whatever could cause such a disturbance. It sounded like bulls fighting like crazy. One moment, a great roar tore across the sky, threatening to make the stars disappear; the next, another would follow, causing the moon to shake in its dark cradle. This went on for ages, as if the boys who ran the station – Henry and Jens, as I said – had either failed to maintain those engines or had become demented enough to misuse them.

“I’m not even sure it was possible to get such thunderous overlapping grumbles to come from a single foghorn. I didn’t learn until the following morning that Henry was away at the time, that only Jens was in the building that evening. Even so, losing control of that machine could never result in anything like *this* insane noise.

“The disturbance went on for about ten minutes, certainly longer than it took me to reach harbourside. I was relieved when it ended, just as suddenly as it had begun. The air along the coastline felt fragile, as if more

violence might be done to it at any moment. Rain kept falling and hissing against the sea's surface. The wind howled and whistled. But nothing else disrupted my return to Robin Hood's Bay, where I tied up my vessel, quickly unloaded my haul, and then hurried home and locked the door. I didn't even go out drinking that night. But with no wife around to nag, I necked a lot of scotch indoors, believe me."

Malcolm paused again, possibly to seek a nip of the kind of liquor he'd just alluded to. George could admit to feeling a need for something similarly strong himself. But then his mind presented the image he'd tried suppressing since his informant had first mentioned some vast entity hurtling towards the coast, blotting out the lighthouse and causing booming unrest that cold, wet night. He recalled the photographs he'd seen on the Internet yesterday, the ones of sculpted carvings depicting great Cthulhu, a semiaquatic beast whose head writhed with tentacles and which could travel huge distances as its body was made of something other than conventional organic tissue. He pictured this thing clinging to the front of that foghorn building, huge face wedged against it, feelers thrust through shattered windows, making plaster break away from the wall it struck on the far side. Then he saw a cowering person – previously seated at the centre of a heretical pentagram, chanting forbidden rites and surrounded by candles – being claimed by the monster, snatched inexorably away, principally because he "knew too much" or had tried invoking the Great Old Ones when the stars weren't "right" at the time.

Just then, as George reeled in response to this onslaught of mental imagery, Malcolm Harp spoke again, his voice full of unwitting menace.

"Have you ever seen a slug clinging to the edge of a beer glass, my friend? You know how, when you leave a pint outside overnight and the next morning one of the things has slithered up its side, leaving a trail of gunge, poking its slimy probes over the rim?"

George said nothing, just tried to block out the recollection of another recent event.

"Well, *that* image haunted me for quite a few nights afterwards." Then the man's voice shifted in modulation, moving in less than a heartbeat from mere tremulous to palsied. "Anyway, soon after I saw the photographs showing something very similar."

"*Photographs*?" asked George, heart hammering hard and even inducing a stutter. "Someone took *p-pictures* of that…*thing*?"

"Hold on. I need to track back a bit." Malcolm went silent for several seconds, but not for long enough that George could speak again. "After the events of that evening, the whole area was in turmoil. Emergency services had flocked to Whitby, which had flooded worse than any other place in the area. This was why attention was drawn away from the lighthouse and the foghorn building – because few people lived there. But when a person was reported missing, and as the property he worked in bore unusual damage, certain parties wanted to speak to locals who might have witnessed anything significant that evening.

"We were all interviewed, me and the lighthouse staff and even Henry once he'd come back from his travels inland. None of us said more than we had to – like, me a well-known drinker claiming to see *that* kind of thing? I'm nobody's fool, pal – and it was only later, while talking together in the same pub, that our discussion got around to…well, *other* matters.

"That was when Henry Gamble, my drinking buddy, told us about things he wanted to get off his chest, including what he'd found in the foghorn building after returning that night. It was seriously weird gear – as you know, suggestions of black magic and the like. I was so shaken that I decided to 'fess up my own story, about everything I'd seen while coming back from my fishing trip. You better believe that by now the pub corner where we sat had gone deathly silent.

"Then the two other guys revealed their photos."

George felt his mouth miss a rasping breath. But he said nothing at all.

"They'd taken them from the top of the lighthouse, looking down at the…at the *intruder* further along the coastline." Malcolm paused to swallow, but then quickly continued, "These were Polaroid snaps and hadn't needed processing by anyone else. Which was just as well. Because…oh fuck…because the shots – smudged by rain and most of them blurred, as if the taker, one or other of the guys, had been shaking at the time – showed something vast and dark and troubling. Something with far too much body mass. Something twice the width of the building it was attacking, head wedged firmly against the front. Spiny black shapes had lifted behind it, from its massive back. Its clawed feet – or whatever hammer-like things it had at the end of its thick limbs – were sunk knuckle-

deep in all the mud and water below. I reckon each of them was as big as a small car."

By this time Malcolm had worked up a frenzied tone, clearly revisiting memories he'd probably refused to entertain for years. After another pause, during which George certainly heard the man take another drink, he continued, his voice a bit calmer now.

"A few days later, the lighthouse staff left the area, seeking work elsewhere. They'd said nothing to the authorities about what they'd seen that night, let alone shown them those freakish snaps. I could imagine some folk saying we'd all faked them, the way people do when things like that show up from time to time.

"Then – much to my regret, because he was such a good pal – Henry moved all the way to Malton, where he began work with a printing company, which might even have offered the facilities to doctor photos in that way. In any case, even after all the fuss in Whitby had died down, there was no point in taking the risk, in jeopardising our reputations in skilled professions. We all had ourselves to feed."

"But those photos," said George, interrupting the guy in full flow.

"What about them, pal?"

After a sharp inhalation, George added, "In fear of public ridicule, did the lighthouse guys take them away, wherever they decided to go?"

"Nope."

A silence, and then George asked, "Were the pictures destroyed?"

"Nope."

Long seconds passed, and as his informant seemed unlikely to volunteer the information, George eventually asked, "So what *happened* to them?"

There was another pause, during which George thought he heard a seagull way above Malcolm's home, screeching over that ancient cliff-side. That was when the man finished, "*I* have them."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stockholm was a beautiful place, and one George had wanted to visit for years. It might be the Scandinavian link between the city and Jens Amundsen (as well as Gustaf Johansen, the author of the document George was having transcribed) that had prompted a few weird dreams since his and Christine's arrival several days earlier, each involving that same geographically implausible island and its mythical denizens.

He'd been thinking too much lately about Cthulhu, ever since his first encounter with its improbable story back in England. The issue was lodged in his subconscious, perhaps preventing him from dwelling on something else lurking in his brain. In that sense, it might even be healthy to continue focusing upon the Great Old One and whatever unspeakable creatures were supposedly buried under the earth, awaiting dark magic to rouse them from slumber. After all, the alternative might be even worse.

His wife had been eager for him to focus on the case, maybe realising that the story was all just the wild imaginings of a bunch of guys with too much time on their hands. All the same, something troubled George about these rationalisations, and his latest nightmares (which he'd yet to relate to Christine) made this concern feel more urgent. But he also realised that he was supposed to be enjoying the first leg of their long-awaited world tour.

They'd spent a day travelling the city's large number of islands, admiring fine architecture and rich vegetation among it, including countless trees whose yellow leaves calmed the senses, making George feel that only grace existed in the world and that he'd miss out on so much once his time to depart eventually came.

This was a skewed perspective, because while passing convenience stores, they noticed newspaper headlines about the state of the planet and how close everywhere seemed to developing serious problems. But they

refused to let this mar their holiday. In Stockholm, the atmosphere was one of refined civilisation, with neatly maintained government buildings, quiet churches and museums, a restrained dining culture boasting multinational cuisine, and a serious-minded yet cheerful population.

All the same, George grew alarmed when they chanced upon an island called Lånngholmen, which boasted sculpture displays. One exhibited the work of an artist who'd scattered geometric blocks around the grounds in random profusion. George, gazing intensely to make sure all remained in perspective, turned to Christine. "Are you seeing what *I'm* seeing?"

"I don't know, George," his wife replied, with the concerned tone she'd recently adopted when matters relating to her husband's perceptions were alluded to. "What *are* you seeing?"

"Well, it's a…a landscape made of blocks. It's like something out of Escher. I'm not sure it all adds up."

"I'm not sure it's supposed to." Christine pointed to a sign near the gated entrance, which read: NO HORIZONS. "I think it's supposed to represent a world in which nothing is anchored by the usual dimensions – no up, no down, no left, no right. Just…free-floating stuff."

His wife understood more about modern art than he did, and he decided to accept her interpretation. The crucial thing was that he wasn't imagining this – his dreams remained the property of sleep and had yet to spill over into wakefulness – and he could continue to believe that life was as prosaic as he'd encountered it all his life.

When they returned to their hotel later that day, however, he was served with a blunt reminder that nothing was ever as it seemed.

He'd regularly checked for email during the last few days, ever since Malcolm Harp in Robin Hood's Bay had promised to take to his local library the photographs given to him in 1975, get them scanned, and ask for help in emailing them. The pictures were apparently blurred and would mean little to anyone not familiar with their back-story. Only George Cox and maybe five other people in the world (one almost certainly dead) would appreciate their importance.

George now had a message sent from a newly created email account, presumably because the fisherman would have had little use for one previously. While opening the communication, George reflected on how long it had taken him to persuade the man to overcome his technological

limitations and send him the pictures. Malcolm Harp had had more reservations about sharing the photos at all. But once George had resorted to Christine's trick, reminding Malcolm about his terminal illness, the man had eventually agreed to do so.

His wife was in the shower, allowing George to review the images at his leisure. Their hotel bedroom was smartly decorated and full of stylish furniture, but now his attention was reduced to the creature about to be revealed in scanned versions of the original Polaroid shots. As calmly as possible, George activated the first of four attachments.

It must have been twenty minutes before he regained consciousness. George worked this out by reflecting on how long it usually took Christine to change for dinner. After opening his eyes, he saw her leaning across the bed onto which he'd collapsed, presumably while reviewing the contents of that solitary email attachment. Whether the images presented had precipitated a bout of dizziness or this had been a symptom of his tumour, it was impossible to say. The more events unfolded in this case, the more George suspected that these were one and the same thing.

"Are you all right, George?" his wife asked with fretful haste, trying to help him sit up while brandishing a glass of water she must have fetched from the bathroom.

I have Cthulhu in my head, he thought in delirium, but then propped himself up against the headboard, shaking confusion from his skull. He saw his laptop open beside him, its screen turned mercifully away. It wasn't that he couldn't recall what he'd seen there – a series of images so profoundly disturbing that he'd felt unstable with impending doom – rather that he was glad Christine was unable to view them. In one sense, he wanted to protect her from such horrors, but in another he didn't want her to learn how deeply involved he'd become in them. It was all genuinely frightening.

"I think I…I must have suffered another of my…episodes," he explained, his voice broken as much by deceit as disorientation. He felt lucid now. Moments later, he leaned to one side and snapped shut his laptop, hoping the manoeuvre wouldn't make him look guilty.

His wife was yet to reply, which made him feel under scrutiny. He glanced up, but instead of her usual knowing gaze, he perceived something more unsettling, a species of brittle discomfort. It forced him to speak at once.

“What…is it, Christine? Are you okay?”

It was only now that he realised she was holding her iPhone, a sight that reminded him of the photographs, especially one vivid image of a greenish figure, inadequately illuminated by moonlight, clinging to a cliff-side the way a child might address a dinner table, face pressed forwards to reach treats on top. But then George observed his wife’s expression, which had assumed another mood, that of a doctor about to deliver devastating news to some terror-stricken patient.

“Christine? What’s wrong? *Tell* me. Come on. I can see it in your eyes.”

After several more seconds, during which she swayed from side to side, his wife sat beside him on the bed, still holding her iPhone, its large screen exposed like an inhuman fingerprint. Without speaking, perhaps believing that she’d primed him during their holiday in the northeast of England, she triggered the camera’s playback function.

The display revealed nothing controversial, just the room they were in. But then the lens zeroed in on the film’s subject, and George wasn’t slow to observe that it was himself. He was slumped on the ground, dressed in the shirt, tie and trousers he’d put on after taking a shower following the long sightseeing walk today. He and his wife were preparing to dine in the hotel’s restaurant, until something had got in the way: a faint, a fall, possibly even a blow to the skull. But could concussion account for his subsequent behaviour?

After sitting up – eyes rolling back, hands raised to sweep the air, mouth stretching as wide as his jaw was deep – he cried words whose only transcription was, “*Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn!*”

This was soon repeated, each utterance gaining disconcertingly in volume.

“*PH’NGLUI MGLW’NAFH CTHULHU R’LYEH WGAH’NAGL FHTAGN! PH’NGLUI MGLW’NAFH CTHULHU R’LYEH WGAH’NAGL FHTAGN! PH’NGLUI MGLW’NAFH CTHULHU R’LYEH WGAH’NAGL FHTAGN!*”

But George recalled none of it.

Once the recording ended – almost three minutes later, when the figure onscreen finally lapsed into abject silence – Christine put down her iPhone and grasped one of his hands.

“Please don’t worry about it,” she said, even though her voice trembled. “I felt frightened at first, but it’s as Dr. Kilroy explained, isn’t it? The tumour was always likely to cause such random outbursts, with garbled language.”

He said nothing, simply looked at her. Deep in his brain, maybe even the part intruded upon by Cthulhu’s malignant replicant, he saw that hideous creature draped over Whitby’s cliff-top, muscles bulging, wings flapping with severity. Its tentacle-burdened face was pushed against a tiny building close to the edge, one scarcely lit by the lighthouse from which this image had been captured by two young men, who’d suppressed their evidence in fear of public complications.

Until now.

Until George had discovered their secret.

But no, he hadn’t merely discovered it. However unwitting his actions were, he was continuing the work begun many years earlier by someone who’d been drawing upon an account of which George still lacked any understanding.

He wondered how long he’d have to wait before his former academic colleague delivered the translation; this suddenly seemed more necessary than ever. George thought that he might email the man a polite reminder the moment he’d set Christine’s mind at rest, with more lies to add to so many existing ones.

CHAPTER NINE

They'd stayed in Sweden for three days and then flown south for a further three in Ghana. George had always been intrigued by the continent of Africa and wanted to visit at least one part of it. He'd chosen this one after a recommendation from an ex-colleague, who'd claimed that the country's complex mix of ethnic tribes and rich culture offered a good blend of pleasures.

Their hotel was a classy place just outside the capital city of Accra, and during their first few days they'd enjoyed fine cuisine and plentiful drink, complemented by guided tours of local attractions, including the Black Star Monument, the impressive Planetarium, and the architecturally striking National Theatre.

On their final day, George had decided that he wanted to experience more authentic African life, away from sanitised tours targeted at holidaymakers. After hiring a car, he and Christine had driven north to a huge lake bordered by Digya National Park and chanced upon a group of tribal Ghanaians who, following a brief negotiation on George's part, had agreed to let them attend a ceremony planned that evening.

George had learned about similar events on the Internet, while awaiting a reply from the academic translating his Norwegian document. After receiving an "out of office" message from the man's email account, George had assumed he must be away on annual leave and was possibly carrying out the task he'd promised. It was only lingering paranoia that made George feel as if the guy, now in possession of "too much knowledge", had mysteriously disappeared, just as Jens Amundsen had after reading the same material.

As he took a seat with his wife among a large number of smiling natives (several other white tourists were in attendance, presumably having

arranged similar access to this event), George recalled a further observation made by Professor Lovecraft at Miskatonic University in the USA. The scholar had claimed that primitive tribes, uncorrupted by modern modes of thought, were more in tune than others with the Great Old One mythology. They might even share communion with Cthulhu, the way George appeared to right now, leaving him closer in spirit to the Ghanaians' traditions than he felt comfortable with. The moment they all started dancing, his psyche, delicate lately even at its best, grew increasingly alarmed.

Something about the incessant rhythms produced by musicians equipped with drums and whistles refused to let his mind assimilate the events accompanying them. In a dusty plain situated alongside a glittering lake, countless tribesmen and women cavorted, each dressed in yellows, oranges and reds. Some carried knives, others water jugs; most sang strange words as a chorus-leader – an older man with a corrugated ribcage and many rings through his nose – coordinated activities, arms held aloft, as if to indicate the velveteen sky with its sparkling canopy of stars.

It was a warm evening, but George was convinced that as the ceremony became increasingly manic, a soft wind grew stronger, tossing about the leafy tops of nearby palm trees and throwing up scatterings of sand. He was less certain whether the dancers demonstrated impossible feats, such as levitation or prolonged exposure to fiery torches. All the same, the shortage of light this late in the evening had offered George these impressions, or perhaps his mounting tiredness had.

Once the dance routine had come to an end and the music had died with a drumbeat like a failing heart, George drew upon his recent lack of civility, his devil-may-care attitude. By this time, the other white people were preparing to leave and even Christine was suggesting that they should both do likewise. But George was now determined to sustain the ceremony beyond its usual span. As the many Ghanaians began moving away, satiated after praying to their Gods in such a striking manner, George stood and, drawing the words effortlessly from fractured memory, cried, "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!*"

At first he received little response, just a sort of shocked silence as countless pairs of dark eyes swivelled to identify the source of this disturbance. A long silence followed, during which George felt Christine grip one of his hands, as if to say, "What are you *doing*, darling?" But he refused to withdraw. Feeling lucid, unlike when he'd uttered identical

words in Stockholm several days earlier, he spoke again with even greater volume.

“PH’NGLUI MGLW’NAFH CTHULHU R’LYEH WGAH’NAGL FHTAGN!”

On this occasion, his words *did* elicit a reaction. Almost in unison, the countless native Ghanaians, who’d passionately participated in a tribal ritual, began muttering frantically to each other, profound unease flickering across their faces. It was as if someone had just revealed a terrible secret which this group of closely bonded people had yet to admit even to themselves, let alone to outsiders. And now George was yelling it under indifferent astral bodies.

His wife had begun tugging at his arm, urging him to back off, to quit what she must believe was another illness-induced act. But George had rarely felt more focused. Maybe the tumour had gifted him with stubborn resolution. All he knew for certain was that his words had had a profound impact on the primitive people up ahead and that the myth must be less obscure than he and others had suspected. Professor Lovecraft, it seemed, had been correct.

As the group’s leader paced forwards from the pack, perhaps seeking to calm his peers by engaging with George, Christine finally got her way. She sounded frightened when she whispered, “I want to leave, *now*,” and George had no wish to trouble her any more than was necessary.

As they departed, the dark-faced man looked on with jaded eyes and for George this confirmed a new realisation: Cthulhu existed, or at least more than just a few madmen north in the world believed It did.

CHAPTER TEN

George and his wife were staying in Riyadh, at a hotel with modern facilities. After exploring the city on the first day of three they'd spend in Saudi Arabia, Christine had claimed to feel tired, the brief time lag from Africa having caught up with her, and that she'd like to take it easy. George had agreed, but as his wife had gone off to enjoy a sauna and then a manicure, he'd stepped outside, eager to respond to a curious pressure in his skull, one which demanded that he move away, regardless of the concern Christine would express later after noticing that he'd vanished for a considerable period.

Riyadh was half-contemporary, half-baroque. Smart modern architecture – media studios, telecommunication centres, a sprawling university – stood against ancient temples and mosques. The temperature was high this March afternoon, heat haze rising from roads packed with revving vehicles and excitable pedestrians. This was possibly one of the noisiest places George had ever visited, but none of that interfered with the presence in his skull – not quite a voice, but something similar – instructing him to go this way and that way and then this way again. He felt as if he were in a trance, and people all around him the denizens of some dream-world, muttering gibberish as he passed.

By the time he'd obeyed at least twenty wordless instructions – it was like having a satnav system inside his head – he'd reached the city centre's perimeter, where manmade properties ended, yielding to acres of sandy terrain infrequently occupied by buildings and roads leading across it like veins through the human body. The latest symptom of his illness, possibly induced by minor jetlag, had directed him along a winding lane flanked on both sides by stone-built shacks of a hermetic bearing, each boasting arched windows, low roofs, and chimneypots which smoked solemnly with fragrant scents.

At the end of this passageway stood a dusty expanse of broken rock; it was into this that the voice in his skull suggested that he should advance. George, no more than a passenger bound to an irresistible process, remained wary, knowing that a great number of Middle Eastern inhabitants were hostile to Westerners. Indeed, of all the international disputes the planet suffered right now, those in this area were potentially the most explosive.

All the same, as the tumour in his brain issued more guidance, George didn't cease walking until he reached an opening of sorts, carved into a rock-face at the foot of a vegetation-free hillock. Was he supposed to enter here? He believed so. What would he find inside? There was only one way to find out.

Looking left and then right, seeing nobody in the area who presented a threat, he offered his wife a brief thought. Realising that his investigations were currently more crucial, he finally entered what must be a cave.

As soon as the dark shut off the sunshine, George recalled the email he'd received the previous night. His former colleague, the expert in Scandinavian languages, had almost finished translating the document sent just over a week ago. The man had suggested that George should prepare himself to reflect on some bizarre material, which had caused the academic to wonder whether the manuscript was fiction. George had explained that it probably *had* been invented, but little more than that; he was eager for the guy to complete what would surely provide the final knowledge he required to make sense of the whole story.

He edged along a narrow corridor, whose floor descended and roof grew lower as he advanced. By the time he reached the end, where almost complete darkness clustered, George felt as if he was much deeper in the earth than he'd been before entering this silent chamber. How he could be sure about this, he had no idea, because there was no perceptual context to judge against, no stable horizon or proximate objects enabling him to anchor his body to the location.

Unable to see anything around him, he pushed one hand into his trouser pocket and removed his mobile phone. Once opened, the device cast a harsh light around him, lending life to the passage without exposing all that the place might harbour in its twitching alcoves. A number of symmetrical stone blocks stood nearby, each making him believe that the trancelike state he'd endured outside was a convincing dream, one in which

geometry was about to play havoc with his expectations, rendering up down, left right, and gravity a game of unpredictable diagonals.

The blocks remained mercifully stable and he soon noticed an imposing pillar directly ahead. It was about his height, and its upright bore elaborate carvings, all toothy fish and lithe beasts, their bodies wrapped around each other. These creatures were locked together in either licentious bliss or intense warfare, but none held George's attention for long. It was the figure standing at the head of this post which commanded that.

He'd seen this thing before, in photographs uploaded to the website he'd reviewed, documenting what little was known about the Great Old Ones. Its author, drawing principally upon Professor Lovecraft's research, had suggested that a number of carvings existed in the world, each depicting great Cthulhu, the supposed leader of an ancient group of mythological beasts. Some of these sculptures, created during a period of dreams suffered by artists, poets and madmen back in the 1920s, had been found in North America's Deep South, in West Africa, in the Far East, in Greenland, and in many other parts of the world. But many believed that the legend's most committed adherents existed here, in the Middle East, and that this region was most likely to boast evidence of such devotion.

This conclusion was certainly supported by what George saw in front of him. Holding up his phone, guiding its torchlight, he observed a handcrafted facsimile of a *thing* it would surely do no man good to witness in the flesh. The monster was identical to those he'd seen depicted on that website and in the photographs of the entity he'd observed pressed against England's northeast coastline, face-tentacles thrust deep into a cliff-side building. Here were the same tremendous limbs, diaphanous wings, greenish bulk, and a head bearing multiple sensory organs.

It was Cthulhu. Drawing him like some terrible sickness across an entire city. And showing him again how real It was.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In New Zealand (where they'd stay for four days), the time-lags between each leg of their tour finally caught up with George. Believing that he'd functioned for over a week on adrenalin induced by intrigue, he realised that he needed to take it easy, in case a medical complication arose.

He'd got himself into trouble with Christine after leaving her that day in Saudi Arabia, going missing for what had turned out to be an impossible six hours. Had he actually spent so long exploring that Middle Eastern city? That was apparently true, even though the episode had felt as if it had taken only a fraction of that period. Like the Whitby foghorn whose bullish cry always sounded delayed, perhaps time wasn't behaving normally right now, minutes bleeding into hours and hours haemorrhaging into days.

After travelling around the Auckland area before leaving for South America, their final day came upon them. One evening in mid-March, as the UK surely sat in the cold and rain, George and Christine dined outside the ranch they'd hired near the city, enjoying the final throes of the country's summer. Everything felt topsy-turvy, largely because of their location on the opposite side of the globe. They were also aware that, over halfway through their holiday, which had served as something to focus on after George's terminal diagnosis, their lives were set to decline. There was just Chile and the USA left to visit, before returning home to an uncertain period during which George might last for years or maybe just months. Time passed quickly, and the important thing, as George had learned lately, was to savour every moment he had left.

They enjoyed steak that evening, cooked perfectly by Christine, and a fine wine fermented from local grapes. After eating, George took his wife's hand and led her to a small lake, where they sat in the shade of a tree, observing the intense sun setting over a distant horizon. It was late and yet wonderfully warm, which made them realise that, however much strife

existed elsewhere on the planet, the world could be a wonderful place and shouldn't be casually dismissed.

George turned to Christine, took another sip of the delicious wine, and then said, "I love you, darling. I love you so much."

She responded coyly, much like the young woman she'd been when they'd first met. In this golden light, she looked only a little older than that, and the sight almost made him cry. "I know you do, George. And I love you, too."

He placed his free arm around her, drawing her closer. Tears had begun rolling down his cheeks, but unlike on previous treasured occasions – their wonderful marriage; the births of their children; his fiftieth birthday, when Christine had arranged a surprise party, inviting all their friends – he refused to wipe them away. *Let the universe observe my grief*, he thought, seeing a few stars emerging in the dense fabric of the sky. *Let me transform its indifference to pity.*

But what did the cosmos care about him? In fact, what did it care about anybody? Didn't he possess evidence of one of its vicious emissaries, an otherworldly monster primed to unleash terror upon the planet? Wouldn't the emergence of great Cthulhu, along with other unspeakable entities, herald the end of civilisation, leading people to riot en masse as so many cities burned?

He mustn't think about any of this. He'd vowed earlier to concentrate on only his wife tonight. He glanced down at Christine and noticed that she'd removed her iPhone, presumably intending to record these precious moments, as their heads pressed together and they maintained the silence that all wise people knew was the only way to communicate profound human bonds. George imagined that she'd want a memento of this event, one to review once he'd gone, helping her to recall how happy they'd been, soul-mates permanently united by some unknowable force.

Later, lying in bed together and listening to an unexpected storm brew outside, they reviewed the footage and, at one stage, noticed a band of orange suffusing them, like a spectral commentary on their nuptial bliss. Christine explained that the focus function on her phone was occasionally unable to adjust to bright light, and that when the sun had dipped, the lens had probably become confused.

Maybe everything is similarly prosaic, George reflected as he settled down for the night. *Perhaps every piece of information I've acquired lately about the Great Old Ones has a rational explanation and I've wanted to believe in their existence so I don't feel alone as I reach the end of my life.*

But how could he think this way when he had his wife to cling to, his children back in Europe, and all his friends from his former career? Maybe he should drop enquiry into his recent discoveries; perhaps he shouldn't even read the translation of that ageing manuscript he was expecting any day now.

As Christine breathed deeply in his arms, suggesting that she'd fallen asleep, George heard thunder rumble beyond the ranch's bedroom window, like the unforgiving footfalls of cruel deities. He switched off the lamp on his bedside table, resisting the urge to check his laptop for email. The world could get along without him for one night, even as it raced towards inexorable destruction.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was the following day, while waiting for their flight in the airport, that George eventually succumbed to temptation and checked his phone for messages. Tremendous storms had lashed the area overnight, delaying their flight, leaving him and Christine with little alternative but to occupy the departure lounge with countless other disgruntled passengers.

George's mind had turned, perhaps inevitably, to events that had happened during their trip so far. He recalled the unconscious chant he'd delivered in Stockholm, the tribe he'd visited in Ghana, the trancelike state into which he'd lapsed in Saudi Arabia and the hideous sculpture he'd discovered by obeying an unnatural form of guidance.

At least nothing of similar unsettling import had occurred during their stay in New Zealand, even though George was wary enough not to tempt fate. He and his wife were still yet to leave the country, after all. Indeed, might the rapidly transformed weather conditions have something to do with that? Could the impish planet be having its final say, before unleashing something frightening upon all its unsuspecting occupants?

But George was being egocentric. The world was a complicated place, and despite his recently acquired knowledge about an important strand in its history – that it had once been inhabited by a race of alien beings, who'd since been buried by spells and still waited for the stars to be right to prompt a re-emergence – it endured more prosaic horrors. Many were announced by newspaper headlines in the airport shops he passed while summoning enough confidence to check for email. The Eurozone remained in political chaos, the North Koreans continued to be provocative, and the seemingly unsolvable Israeli-Palestine conflict had reignited again.

It's just the same old, same old, thought George, retaking his seat beside his wife and finally removing his phone. Despite his illness, he

remained fearful about the state of the planet. After all, he had his children to safeguard and wife to protect. Any information he could gather might help him to achieve these goals. The thought prompted him to access the message he'd received from his former colleague, one with a document attached, a word processor file called: "TRANSLATION_NORWEGIAN MANUSCRIPT_COX".

As George, heart beating fast, was about to open the attachment, the flight was announced. He and Christine, along with all the other passengers, were required to collect their hand luggage and then walk to their gate, where they queued for another half hour before finally boarding the plane.

Uncertainty about the weather in the South Pacific had led to travel problems, with many journeys by boat cancelled and flights rerouted. This would compromise the journey to Chile, the plane's path adjusted to avoid the worst of the storms. The doglegged trip would take an extra few hours but would deliver them to their destination on the same day as they'd planned.

Other passengers complained, particularly those with appointments or connecting flights to make, but George and his wife were resigned to the situation. Even the highest human authorities could do nothing to legislate for acts of God, or rather, as Christine pointed out after they'd taken their seats, the complex vicissitudes of a mysterious planet.

Once they were airborne and travelling, George finally accessed the document he'd been sent by email. After such a delay, the translation George spent the next hour reading seemed almost anticlimactic. He felt he'd already known what material would be alluded to, and this troubled him more than what became apparent from Gustaf Johansen's account. It was a chronicle of events in which the man and fellow sailors had been involved back in March, 1925.

Their ship, a schooner called *Emma*, had left Auckland in New Zealand, headed for a port in Chile. After being blown off course during a heavy storm, it had chanced upon another vessel – the *Alert* – carrying a savage crew which, after issuing warnings to the *Emma* about occupation of this part of the ocean, had begun firing a cannon. The *Emma* had sunk, but its crew (including Johansen) had captured the *Alert* by climbing aboard and killing everybody, losing only three men in the process. The following day, the eight survivors had reached an uncharted island, which sounded

like the one George had dreamt about lately, ever since entering that foghorn building in Whitby.

Other familiar aspects of this story hadn't escaped him. For one thing, there was the location in which it had occurred – in the South Pacific, somewhere between Chile and New Zealand. That was where he and his wife were right now. A great storm had also been involved, and George had only to take a glance out of the plane's small window to realise that this was identical, too. Although it was already growing dark, diagonal slashes of rain affected the cloud formations, revealing glimpses of the ocean below. Then there was the date on which all these events had occurred: March, 1925 – exactly fifty years earlier than the episode in England, when another Norwegian, a guy called Jens Amundsen, had found this same text in a bottle, before summoning Lord knew what to his home at the time.

George wondered what had happened to the document's original version, and how much more Professor Lovecraft might have understood if this had survived the Norwegian. But the fact was that its author had claimed that few people with his kind of knowledge lasted long afterwards. This had surely encouraged him to make a copy, the one to which George now had access and at least one other person had read in its entirety. He hoped his former colleague had dismissed its troubling content and had no desire to further pursue issues it raised. It might be sensible for George not to do so himself, but it wasn't as if he had much longer to live.

He hesitated, glancing at Christine reading a magazine beside him, but then curiosity got the better of him; he returned his gaze to his phone to finish reading the sailor's statement.

What followed was a harrowing description of the eight men's experiences on that unexpected island. It involved many aspects with which George was familiar: the strange terrain with impossible geometrics and mutated laws of nature, the weird sculptures scattered right across it, and that terrible beast – the bulky-limbed, savage-winged, tentacle-faced creature – which had emerged from a mountain at the heart of the place, tearing all asunder in its path.

Six of the sailors had lost their lives there, some going mad at the mere sight of this dreadful entity and others mutilated, ripped apart by the *Thing* advancing thunderously their way. It – great Cthulhu – had given chase to the remaining two, who'd somehow outdistanced it. One of these men had

died in the boat soon afterwards, possibly when delayed shock had induced some cardiac episode.

After returning to Auckland on another ship (the *Vigilant*), the only survivor Gustaf Johansen had spoken with authorities and then travelled home to his wife in Norway, where he'd chronicled his adventures in written form. Little else was mentioned about the case, and that was how the account ended.

George, hearing thunder rumble outside the plane and many other passengers expressing concern, closed the document on his phone. Then he turned to face Christine.

"What's the matter, George?" his wife asked, beginning to show alarm herself. The aircraft had started wobbling, presumably in reaction to the severe storm. Its engines groaned, but George didn't move at all.

"What's the *date* today, Christine?" he asked, his brain seeming to convulse with shock. He couldn't believe that he hadn't made this obvious connection before now.

"The date?" she replied as the plane lurched sideways, causing others to scream and several stewards to hurry into the aisles, issuing unconvincing requests for calm.

"Yes, the *date*."

"Are you…are you having one of your episodes, George?" She pushed one hand in her jacket pocket. George might have suspected that she was seeking her iPhone, planning to record this latest example of his behaviour, if she hadn't then spoken again. "Do you need your medication? I know that all these flights have messed up the timings."

"*Just answer my question*," he barked back, and a few people nearby, despite their unease as the aircraft was lashed left and right by strong winds, glanced across, clearly wondering what was afoot here.

That was when Christine provided the information he required. "It's March the 20th, George," she told him, holding on to her seat, now by necessity.

"And the year, Christine? Tell me the *year*."

"Okay, calm down." She hesitated, but only for a moment. "You know as well as I do that it's *2025*."

George stared at her, his mind zeroing in on facts. He'd needed his wife to confirm his terrible suspicion, if only to make it real for him.

In 1925, there'd been a great storm and Cthulhu had been sighted. In 1975, fifty years later, another tremendous storm had occurred, resulting in Cthulhu being summoned again. And now, fifty more years on, a third terrible storm was underway.

It's happening in a cycle, thought George, but that was all he could do to absorb this latest truth about the Great Old Ones.

The aircraft, steered wildly off course, had started plunging towards the South Pacific.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the time the plane hit the ocean, chaos had erupted inside. George couldn't figure out what had happened – there was so much screaming and crying to distract him – and the only reassurance from the flight crew had been a message from the pilot during the descent concerning damaged speed sensors and a stalled engine. Everybody had been instructed to put on life vests and to assume the crash position, but then the aircraft had hit something which felt simultaneously firm and yielding. Moments later, a whole section packed with seats had split in two directly in front of George and Christine, ripping away the walls on both sides and creating a sudden foamy abyss all around.

The sound had been terrible, like whales being assaulted with savage weapons. All the same, keeping firm hold of his wife, George had unfastened their seatbelts, setting them both free to surge forwards amid displaced rising water. This took them through a ragged gap which had opened in the top of the fuselage as the rest of the plane had started sinking, dragging countless other passengers – men, women, children – to a mass liquid grave.

Everything was hissing, frothing, churning insanity. As if ordained by higher forces than human will, George kept hold of Christine as they were thrust through freezing water, holding their breaths until, with a mighty release like blood vessels bursting under severe stress, they reached the writhing surface. The aircraft behind them lurched and swayed, as if a mockery was being made of humankind's delusional command of nature, and then the whole thing started sinking with an immense gulp of foam and detached fragments.

Minutes passed, during which George and his wife plunged in and out of the ocean, buffeted back and forth by crisscrossing strands of rampant meteorology. The plane struggled hard against gravity, bobbing up and

down as water violated every vacant part of it. People protested inside, voices muffled by twisting metal and the unrelenting storm, which never ceased lashing the area with its savage rains and wild winds. Nobody else could have acted as quickly as George, all failing to detach themselves from seats as the passenger compartment had crumpled and collapsed. Perhaps they hadn't had the same foreknowledge he had; maybe it was that simple.

George and Christine had drifted a hundred feet from the melee, two improbable survivors of this headline-grabbing tragedy. Once his mental acumen had returned, George imagined recovery of the aircraft's black box and the way its data might be reported in the news: technological malfunction; loss of autopilot; inability to steer the plane from a specific path, as if it had been drawn that way by some bizarre magnetism. The plane's engine failure had been no accident, he was sure of that, and neither was his survival. This whole event had been conjured into being. As George glanced up at the darkening sky, where tiny points of ice had begun pushing through, he realised something else significant: the stars would be "right" tonight. At last the circumstances were perfect for great Cthulhu to rise again.

Once the aircraft had vanished, sliding into the depths with its bellyful of victims, George turned and saw, lurking on the horizon like a worryingly dark shape in an X-ray, the island he'd expected, the one he'd dreamed about lately and towards which he and Christine were borne by predictable tides.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was half an hour later, as the storm continued pounding the earth with unrelenting brutality, when they reached the beach. George, bewildered by his efforts at saving himself and his wife, was hugely grateful to feel solid ground underfoot; his arms and upper body ached from withstanding so many volatile waves while drifting to this ostensible haven.

The location was just as he'd imagined during uneasy sleep on many nights recently. Huge towers reached up near the island's heart, surrounding a mountain constructed wholly from artificially shaped blocks. The place's vegetation was also symmetrically regimented, with only abstract sketches of plants and flowers rather than the things themselves. Several palm trees, fan-like leaves sprawling, occupied much of the territory ahead, but as George started walking, he felt something synthetic beneath his sodden shoes, as if he was crossing fragments of plastic or perhaps a material which had no place upon this planet. It was squeaky and firm, defying its sieved, orangey appearance.

"George, where are you going?"

He stopped and turned, looking at his wife still lying on the rain-spattered ground. She was soaking wet, but trivial ailments like the common cold or more serious conditions such as influenza or pneumonia were of little interest to him. He was *here*, after all – the place to which all his investigations lately had brought him. He was finally on *R'lyeh*, the fabled home of at least one Great Old One, if not all of them. Suddenly he had much work to do.

"I have to confront It," he said, not knowing exactly what he meant but going on anyway. "I have to face the *Thing*. It's turned me into something I'm not and plans to do the same to the world next – to our beautiful world,

Christine. A place that has *you* in it. And our *children*. And all our *friends*. And so many other worthy people."

He hesitated, brain reeling from the onslaught of rain driving against him and the winds whipping it into such a sordid dance. "If It's going to take all that, I need to look into Its eyes and perceive Its indifference." He paused again, thinking for a moment, and eventually added, "But more than that, I need It to look into *my* eyes and try to destroy me that way."

Christine didn't immediately reply, merely sat up straighter and pushed one hand into a trouser pocket. Then George spoke again.

"Do you understand what I'm saying? Does this make any sense?"

He realised that he'd yet to offer her all the facts of the case but hoped she'd trust him, refusing to reduce his behaviour to a mere symptom of his condition. Indeed, the moment she removed her iPhone, he persuaded himself that she planned to support his latest investigative stage.

"Thanks, Christine," he said, once she'd climbed to her feet and shuffled through the ceaseless rain to catch up with him. During the manoeuvre, she'd activated a feature of her phone, which started whirring. "That's the way, love – record every moment."

As he advanced from that curious beach, stepping between geometric flora and fauna, the landscape assumed a luminescent hue beneath a wash of incipient moon- and starlight. More of those great blocks, their angles problematic, were mounted like a child's building blocks, running alongside an impromptu pathway of hollow-sounding earth. George, marvelling at the complexity of beguiling spatial arrangements, turned to his wife, who'd now raised her iPhone to capture what they experienced, even though she had its lens fixed only on him.

"Look at all these things, Christine! They're like nothing we've ever seen before! Such precision! Such mind-rupturing exactness!"

As he swept out one arm to indicate what he referred to, his wife simply looked at him, eyes loaded with pity and unease.

"Yes, darling," she said, but if she experienced similar awe, why didn't she observe the territory, its dreamlike wonders and elusive configurations? Why did she rather continue to film *him* standing in genuine amazement among such sights?

They moved on, up a gradual incline, where George stooped in pounding rain to pluck a carved object from the top of one of those blocks.

This appeared to be made from a similar substance but what it was he had no idea. It felt like dried putty in his palm and yet seemed harder than that, failing to yield to a fingernail and almost slipping from his trembling grasp. Whatever its nature, the carving's styling suggested creatures it would be unwise to contemplate for too long. Here were hints of monstrous limbs, there the tracings of a hideous face; protuberant wings completed the ensemble, whose combined features tempered George's amazement with abject dread.

"Look at this!" he said, turning again to face his wife, who must have redirected her camera, because when he glanced up he saw that she recorded him and nothing else. "It's malformed, yes, but surely provides evidence in support of my belief: this island is *R'lyeh*, where *great Cthulhu waits dreaming*."

If Christine now looked worried, George would need to be more persuasive. Struggling to assimilate the image of his wife on the path – for a moment, it had seemed as if she'd stood at an unlikely angle to the many disciplined trees beside her – he tossed the sculpture her way, hoping she might catch it with her free hand. But he'd somehow misjudged the gap between them, the item flying at a wild diagonal, rustling into overly organised undergrowth and coming to rest with a delayed sound.

"*Just a rock*," Christine muttered, her voice taking every bit as long to reach him, at least a second after her lips had moved. But was she speaking into her iPhone, enabling its microphone to capture her commentary? Whatever the truth was, George then heard her add, "*Serious hallucinations. Unable to throw straight*."

He might have protested if he hadn't just detected a powerful odour. It seemed to come from behind or maybe even from underneath him, oozing through soil that should be much wetter than it felt. His shoes were still unmarked by dirt, and as he swivelled to advance farther up the slope, that scent grew stronger, heavy in the moist air.

It was how bulls had smelled when he'd been a child and had ventured into Yorkshire countryside. He'd observed fields full of the sluggish beasts, prowling back and forth, looking for cattle to inseminate. The stench had been powerful, eye-wateringly so at times, and now, half a century later, he experienced a similar repulsion, the foul aroma making him consider clamping his hands over mouth and nose.

He looked over one shoulder, wondering how his wife managed to tolerate the same, and was astonished to observe that she seemed untroubled by the stench, her free hand hanging to one side, the other capturing yet more footage.

“Can’t you…*smell*…that?” he asked, his voice half-broken by all the inhalations he needed to take while speaking.

“Oh, darling,” Christine replied, her tone heavy as if she’d realised that she couldn’t take much more. Indeed, were there tears in her eyes? “Let’s go back to the beach. The authorities will be aware of the crash and will soon look for survivors. If we’re the only passengers who didn’t go down with the plane, searchers might fail to locate us. We should remain in clear sight or they might assume that we were drowned like everyone else.”

George didn’t want to hear this – it interfered with his resolution – but was even less eager to listen to what seemed likely to follow. He turned away, stalking up the hill towards the mountain, whose peak was bathed in churning cloud.

“You’re *ill*, George,” his wife called, now a fair distance behind him, shouting above the constant racket of falling rain and howling winds. “You’re ill and need help, my love. None of what you’re seeing here is real. It’s just an island, darling. Just an uninhabited island.”

“No, it’s *R’lyeh*,” George yelled back, already a hundred yards ahead, where the stench grew ever more pungent and the landscape increasingly absurd with weird geometrics. “It’s where *It* resides, where *It* waits dreaming, and where *It* is about to be reborn before bringing down the whole world.”

“It?” Christine replied, giving only tenuous chase, her iPhone no more than half-raised. “What do you mean *It*, George? You’re not making sense.”

“*What do I mean?*” he repeated, incredulousness making his voice shrill. “I mean only one thing: It is *great Cthu–*”

But that was as far as he got.

Because then it happened.

The earthquake.

Its epicentre was here, on this small island. What else could account for the way all the territory around George and his wife farther down the path started grumbling and shaking? After several seconds, George realised that he could hardly stand without his balance being compromised, and then

he whirled to observe Christine also struggling to remain upright. Surely she believed him now, but when bestial grunts were added to the disturbance – they sounded like he'd imagined the Whitby Bull might once have done, sonorous calls which made his bones rattle – she appeared not to cower and flinch as he did.

Maybe time and space in this weird place continued to play tricks on his perception. Perhaps the animal noises – which seemed to emerge from underground, as if something was ascending to prompt such geographic unrest – were delayed in transmission, crossing the distance between George and his wife at reduced speed.

Whatever the truth was, it was clear that a major event was about to occur, and that they'd need evidence to convince what few people remained in the world after so much imminent violence. Everyone who survived must become aware of its true source, those seeds of evil from beyond the stars: great Cthulhu and Its minions, about to rise again.

"*Keep filming!*" George cried, turning to address the mountaintop, whose newly visible peak was only a short walk away. "*Record me facing up to this…to this Thing!*"

Despite a cry from behind him of, "*No, George!*" he advanced farther along the path, struggling to remain upright as the whole island shook and rumbled around him. This was no mere earthquake, he thought, sensing rocks tumbling everywhere. That was when he glanced up into the heavens, observing the sky filled with twinkling jewels.

He knew that the stars were right tonight, and that all the knowledge he'd acquired lately had functioned as a spell of sorts, summoning the Great Old Ones from their ages-old place of slumber. Every one of them was about to be reborn. And he must be present when they were.

Moments later, with rain still hissing and the wind whipped into a vortex, the ragged mountaintop burst apart in a shower of falling stones. None of these brute fragments – most as large as people, some the size of small cars – landed where George's scientifically oriented mind expected them to, each describing wild trajectories and savage arcs. But then intense light followed, like a sudden eruption of volcanic magma. It frothed over the fringe of the giant crater now at the island's heart, was projected yards high with a violent glug, before falling rapidly, the way light never should, and finally began rolling down the mountain's sides.

“*Leave, Christine! Leave now!*” George called over one shoulder, but kept his gaze fixed rigidly ahead, where the landscape was being pulled savagely apart. “*Keep filming at a distance but go and tell everyone!*”

There was no response from behind and that worried George, but as the wind and rain grew ever more pervasive, he was no longer able to focus on that problem – and for a very specific reason.

It had at last appeared.

His first sight of the *Thing* was one of Its immense limbs flopping over that edge of rock and feeling around for purchase. It was as wide as George’s body, greenish in colour, and ended in a suckered snout that clawed manically at the air, trying to establish a secure grip in the world. But how could this appendage be a leg or arm when, in contrast to carved facsimiles he’d seen, it bore no claw, no wedge-like heel, no broadening shaft leading back to its monstrous bearer?

That was when twelve more of these snaking things appeared, each pushing out of the pit like perverted flower-petals and spreading across the crater’s diameter until all were placed equidistantly around the perimeter, like spokes on a wheel.

With a horror that cut directly to his core, George realised what he observed: *merely the face-tentacles of great Cthulhu*.

And now here came the rest of It.

George briefly glanced back at where his wife had waited earlier but was unable to spot her; there was too much seething madness there. Then he turned to hurry forwards, farther up the mountainside, desperate to achieve communion with the terror that had rocked his life.

Now Its limbs *did* appear, claw-fronted wedges every bit as large as trucks. All those cattle sounds increased, thumping across a sky packed with impossible light, like a surrealist’s portrait of illness. When Its head arose, as wide as a house, George was just yards from the drop and found himself gazing directly into Its moonlike face. Alien consciousness, an absence of emotion, lurked deep in its unblinking eyes. Weird gases churned in irises surrounding pupils as black as death. The mouth became visible, a huge slash filled with people-high teeth and a tongue like a battle-toughened mamba. Its breath was a combination of feverish refuge and chemical weapons. The wings, flapping rapidly and enhancing the weather’s power, elevated the creature shuffling from this age-old tomb.

Perhaps other entities, lurking beneath the beast and all as eager to emerge, were forcing It out. It was impossible to say. All George knew for sure was that before the *Thing* made Its final move, before Its bloated bulk tore more wounds into the planet's flesh, leaving It free to corrupt everyone, he had to make his point.

"*You invaded my life!*" he called, yelling over the sound of more breaking rocks. Great Cthulhu lay squarely ahead, still hauling Its stupendous body out of the island's heart, out of mythical R'lyeh. "*You overruled my beliefs about people and their capacity to act with reason! You're uncivilised, you bastard! You murder the good for no better purpose than a tragic truth at the core of our existence: we're all insignificant in this universe!*"

He remembered Christine somewhere back on the path behind him. He pictured his children, David and Vanessa, miles from his current location. He thought of his friends: former colleagues, neighbours, folk he'd met elsewhere. And all this made him despise even more the evil that had violated his life, just when he'd hoped to enjoy a retirement he'd looked forward to. None of it was fair. But that was the nature of the cosmos in relation to humankind: it just wasn't fair.

By now, the beast had fully emerged and bestrode the mountain's crater with psyche-shattering limbs. The sky-blotting mass fading into darkness, George struggled to come to terms with Its improbable size. The best he could do was imagine the *Thing* from a bird's eye view or maybe from an aircraft window's. The beast would occupy the island, like some carved sculpture perched on top of a rough plinth or pedestal. It would roar, just as It did now, with a sound that filled the air with intense vibrations, shaking rocks loose from the land and bending so many symmetrical trees to breaking point. It would be followed by similar creatures, each as hideous and cruelly aloof.

The world was about to end. And George, now borne away by a sweeping tide of light that smelt like burning lava, wouldn't be around to experience that. Death had triumphed as it always did; and life, its brief postponement, was over.

EPILOGUE

“I know this is a difficult time for you, Mrs. Cox,” said Dr. Kilroy, “but any evidence of…well, of the way George’s condition affected him before his death might prove useful to colleagues carrying out research into brain tumours.”

From her chair opposite, Christine nodded with resignation. She’d had several weeks to come to terms with the plane crash, how she’d waited nearly a day on an island experiencing a low-grade earthquake and how recovery helicopters scouting the area had located her, shivering in a cave with only her phone for comfort. It had been a frightening time, especially when her husband had been swept away by lava from the island’s mountain. In hindsight, Christine wondered whether this was a merciful development. George had lapsed into serious delusions at the end, imagining the place as other than it was and being compelled to climb to its upmost point to rage against something. It had been hard to endure, but it was over now.

“That’s why I agreed to attend this meeting,” Christine explained, pulling her iPhone from one pocket and handing it across to the doctor. “As we discussed months ago, I made recordings of George’s symptoms. You’re welcome to download the files, if you wish. I haven’t reviewed them all yet. It’s…well, it’s too soon, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand that, Mrs. Cox, and I’m grateful to you for sharing this.” The doctor – about thirty years old, exhibiting much textbook knowledge about life and death – attached a cable from his computer to the phone, before transferring all the video files. “I’m assuming these recordings include footage from the island?”

“They do.”

“Thanks.” The doctor nodded, pursing his lips in thought. “Haven’t other authorities asked to see that one, too?”

“Oh yes, just about everyone’s requested the final recording. Our travel company. Media reps. A number of insurance agencies. I’ve had no choice but to share them, many times.”

“And…and have *you* watched it yet?”

“It would have been difficult not to.” Christine smiled but only thinly; the expression didn’t touch her eyes. “What with so much else going on in the world right now, it didn’t receive much attention in the national news. But as you’ll see, it’s all quite dramatic.”

The doctor nodded again, glancing up from his computer. “I understand you were lucky to survive the crash.”

She looked away. “It was just the way the plane split apart – directly in front of George and me. My husband acted quickly, as if he’d known he had to. We were the only ones who broke free in the time available before the plane sank.”

“That’s quite remarkable.”

“I realise that,” she replied, and finally looked back at him, as if trying to suppress disturbing suspicions. “Anyway, there’s nothing on those recordings detailing that event. It all relates to what happened later, on the island.”

Dr. Kilroy glanced again at his screen, reached forwards to close a page (almost certainly George’s medical records), and then gazed back at his late patient’s wife.

“May I watch it?” he asked, detaching her phone from his computer and passing it back to her.

“Why not?” Christine stood to walk around the desk and collected her device. “It doesn’t show…well, it doesn’t show George’s final moments, only the island in chaos – the earthquake, I mean. That terrible upheaval.”

Christine noticed that the young man had reopened a webpage he must have been consulting earlier, one documenting events that had crippled the planet in the last few weeks – ever since Christine had been rescued, in fact. There’d been further violence in North Africa, escalating conflict in the Middle East, a threat of nuclear exchange on the Korean Peninsula, a retreat to economic protectionism by the USA, further brutal Chinese conversion to the free market, skyrocketing unemployment and civil unrest in the Eurozone, and a rise in organised crime in South America, to such a degree that the whole continent hardly functioned as an interdependent collective.

Christine had been aware of this news but her grief had cushioned its impact, ruling out the way it troubled many peers, including her adult children, who were now concerned about bringing offspring into such an unstable world. Christine was simply glad that George hadn't lived to witness all this; it would have cut against the grain of his humanistic beliefs, the admirable work he'd achieved as an academic, before being tragically struck down by a *thing* with little compassion for people.

When she looked again, the doctor had closed the Internet and started the file playing. The footage, she knew, lasted about twenty minutes and involved images of a tropical island unoccupied by human dwellers, where natural structures had been left to their wild ways, including many straggly palm trees and misshapen rocks. The place was volcanic, with random sculptures flanking makeshift paths, all of which appeared to have been created by streaks of hardened lava. It was certainly possible to make out shapes in this dried magma, but surely none had been intended. George, now onscreen and indicating one of these items as if perceiving a significance there, must have simply imagined figures in the rock, offering them up as evidence in favour of his delusional theory.

The symmetrical blocks he pointed out were nothing of the sort. He'd lost eye-to-hand coordination, tossing a piece of stone her way with pitiable inaccuracy. Next he'd detected a stench, one powerful enough to make his eyes glisten, but all Christine could recall smelling was pungent ozone and moist vegetation. It had been terribly sad to observe, but it was over now. That was the important thing. All her husband's suffering was gone.

"What's *this*?" asked the doctor, watching eagerly as the recording drew to its frantic conclusion.

Christine looked at the screen and at once knew what the man had referred to. Although George had vanished, swallowed by churning mist and falling rock as she'd hurried back down the mountainside, an immense column of light had lifted from the centre of the shot, near the crater to which her husband had been so eager to travel.

Curious shapes could be observed amid the illumination, one of them resembling a bullish creature, which might even be capable of issuing the terrible cries they both now heard from the computer's speakers. These were nothing more than stone being torn out of place, but even so, such a

dramatic combination of visual and auditory information was sufficient to suggest something else entirely.

Cthulhu, thought Christine, continuing to watch as her iPhone's lens pulled away from a mass of distorted imagery, locating a fathomlessly dark backdrop filled with intense starlight. At that moment, all the trees and rocks down the mountain *did* look regimented, just as George had suggested. But she shouldn't attach significance to that, even when another fearsome roar arose from elsewhere, its sound thunderously delayed.

"My camera isn't the best on the market," she explained, holding up the device for brief inspection. "It's prone to pixilation, as well as lens distortions in particular lights."

The doctor's scientific profession might have persuaded him to accept her explanation. After hesitating for only a moment, however, he asked, "But didn't all this happen in the *evening*?"

Christine smiled a little awkwardly. "It was just the stars, Dr. Kilroy," she said, now heading for the doorway out. "The stars that night were right."

Outside, beyond the room's solitary window, the silence of the hospital grounds belied many terrible events being enacted all around the globe.

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Thank you for taking the time to read this book. We sincerely hope that you enjoyed the story and appreciate your letting us try to entertain you. We realise that your time is valuable, and without the continuing support of people such as yourself, we would not be able to do what we do.

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Thanks, and see you next time!

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Gary Fry lives in Dracula's Whitby, literally around the corner from where Bram Stoker was staying when he was thinking about that character. Gary has a PhD in psychology, but his first love is literature. He is the author of many short story collections, novellas, and novels. He was the first author in PS Publishing's Showcase series, and none other than Ramsey Campbell has described him as "a master."

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